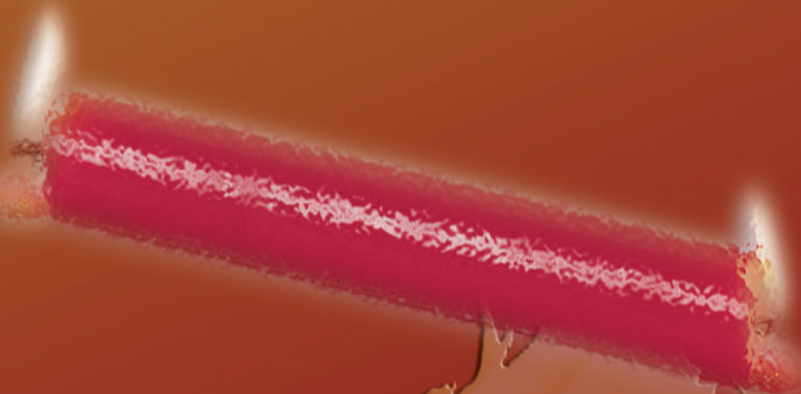


NOT WITHOUT
Flowers



AMMA DARKO

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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NOT WITHOUT
FLOWERS

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FLOWERS

AMMA DARKO



SUB-SAHARAN PUBLISHERS

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Dedication

To Naa Dzama, Kwesi and Nana Kwame

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ALL AROUND THE world, wherever I have been invited to a writers' gathering, be it a workshop, a conference or a seminar, I have always turned out to be the odd one out. Other participants always tend to be Professors; Associate Professors; Lecturers with PhDs and founders or members of reputable Non-Governmental Organizations. I am always (so far) the only writer with an eight to five job as a tax woman.

Added to caring for my two boisterous young boys and running a home, time and space to create is always very tight. So I wish to acknowledge the Hong Kong Baptist University who granted me the opportunity to be part of their first International Writers' Workshop. My stay there provided me with the much needed space and concentration to finalize the structuring of this story.

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An acquaintance who saw me in and out of the Accra Psychiatric Hospital a couple of times, bombarded me with the offer of strong and powerful prayers by, in her words, a no-nonsense pastor, who knew how to deal with those bad spirits. I knew where she was coming from and couldn't blame her. She was very well aware of the Psychiatric Hospital's statistics, that the triggering factors of over ninety percent of the mentally sick female inmates were rooted in marital problems, and drew certain conclusions. I had a hard time trying to convince her that I was there researching for my book.

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Finally, to my Ghanaian publishers, Sub-Saharan Publishers, I say 'Thank you for your belief in me.'

Foreword

OVER A DECADE Amma Darko appears to have seized the centre stage of women's world, plowing, tickling and reaching into inner recesses, to tell their story. A story of misery, pain, agony, dilemmas, frustrations. After *Faceless*, her last novel, where the grim realities of street side nightmares unfold in gory detail, Amma Darko floats her reader this time on a petal of *Flowers*, with a capital F.

But these are *Flowers* of pain. Amma's *Flowers* are not comforting, not soothing; they spark off deadly allergies, and set victims on a trail of dis-ease. They upset Ma, throw her into misery and shatter her dreams, her hopes, her world. It's a world full of inverted reality; yet this topsy-turvy world, becomes the norm in *Not Without Flowers*.

Close to a decade into the twenty-first century, the Ghanaian society Amma Darko mirrors is one of chaos and perverted values. It's a world replete with family crises, triggering nightmares, premonitions, mental disorders, suicide, promiscuity and ultimate infections: HIV/AIDS. But this turbulence is camouflaged under a veil of romance and cultural mores of which polygamy and superstition are ingloriously showcased. Underneath, however, is the messy reality of a pervasive social malaise, of adultery and promiscuity. The tragic outcomes are self evident in the pages: broken homes of childless couples, mothers driven into mental homes, and shattered fathers seeking answers in suicide.

But in the 21st century, Africa descends further into the abyss

of barbarism. The plight of mental patients, largely women, agonizing in prayer camps throughout Africa is amply portrayed. The initials, WCS, inscribed at the entrance of the prayer camp, to which Ma is sent, signals horrors therein. It beckons patients to proceed and voluntarily submit to human rights violation. Since mental disease is portrayed as possession by evil spirits, patients are 'saved' through torture. They are whipped, chained, thrown in filth and squalor, in the name of exorcising the devil. The WCS sign is prescription for the diagnosis: Whipping to Conquer Satan. Amma Darko's depiction of mental patients enduring the torture of healing, shows rare dexterity:

... No pillow for her head... about sixty, skeletal features, completely bald... Around each of her ankles was an iron ring hanged to a thick iron chain...

It was hooked through a hole in a huge blunt iron rod buried halfway into the concrete floor in the centre of the hut. There were other metal hooks in the hole from the other chained ankles. No wonder the wooden door was never locked. There was no need to.

The frail woman stank of stale urine... They tiptoed to the next figure, also bald and huddled on a mat with no pillow. The ankle was also chained... They moved onto the next figure and the next, all women, all old, and bald, all frail and chained, all haggard and stinking of stale urine.

For three rational and enlightened siblings, Randa, Cora, Kweku, to walk their mother into such shackles of horror, clearly signals the family's desperation. And why not? The stigma that mental disease attracts can be crippling, made worse if it points to a fam-

ily history. That is precisely what derailed Cora's love affair with Afful: her mother's ailment and father's suicide, could not be accepted by Afful's parents. The feeling of depression nearly drove Cora herself on a path of emotional suicide.

But Cora's family is not alone in this misery. Idan's elder sister has a hunchback as her fourth child; her first child, a girl, was born with a severe mental handicap, which in-laws blamed on Idan's mother, a witch they say, who passed it on.

Thus, steeped in enigma, superstition, beliefs in sorcery, nemesis, destiny, the story unfolds. But mystery and suspense deepen with anonymous characters who dog the heels of principal actors. An eccentric, shadowy woman with blond Afro wig, and a huge pair of dark glasses, trails Idan, and moves in and out of his path. Who is she? An enigmatic man of God, Prophet Abednego, he calls himself, goes repeatedly after a radio presenter, Sylv Po, to help him reach a man who has been attacked in one leg, by the devil. Who is this Man of God and what is his motive? 5th Wife, who gave an interview to a radio station about the mystery death of her polygamous husband, Pesewa, fears she is being trailed. Who is trailing her? And who is Teacher, Bible in hand always interviewing Ntifor, the man with two wives and a diseased leg? Is Teacher evangelizing? Conducting research? And from whence comes the bizarre prescription, that Ntifor's leg can be saved only if Junior wife is divorced? *Haba!* the prescription is hard to take, and Amma Darko releases the stress and suspense, when Penyin, 2nd wife grabs a pestle waiting to clobber Teacher.

And who is this silhouette who decides to sell his property to please his girlfriend? But suspense does not only subsist on masquerades and silhouettes. Amma Darko achieves the greatest effect through a painfully slow process of identity formation.

Yet it is contemporary social controversies and contradictions

that Amma Darko stirs with the greatest success. A new found tool for the spinning of controversy is private radio — a mirror of current trends in Africa, the radio talk show is used as site for the revelation of secrets, unraveling of scandals, mystery deaths, suicides — indeed the epitome of the limits and the excesses of free speech. Thus the mystery death by suicide of wealthy, polygamous Pesewa turns out to be AIDS related. The 5th Wife uses a free media to dissipate her bottled-up anxieties, and asserts her innocence. But this deepens the rift with her in-laws, who dog her heels and drive her into hiding. The question of who infected Pesewa with the virus, would naturally become a subject of public controversy, until a partial resolution eventually emerges. 5th and youngest Wife, the prime object of suspicion, tests negative for the deadly virus. The four other wives? All Positive. As it turns out, 2nd Wife has extra-marital relations!

The disturbing outcome of Pesewa's marital life throws into sharp focus, the social practice of polygamy in Africa and its attendant risks in an HIV-prone society. Add this to attempts by in-laws to get 5th Wife married to the deceased's brother and the cycle of queries is complete.

Addendum. 5th Wife is spared the deadly virus by her insistence on condoms in a marital situation! She is saved by the sheer mistrust of an age-old cultural practice, subverted in a turbulent world.

But polygamy in African society did not foresee infidelity among co-wives as a possible intrusion. That there could be perfect harmony and mutual trust between co-wives is exemplified in another marital home by childless Penyin, and Kakraba, a mother with children. They are married to Ntifer. Co-wives, but nursing no discord, no suspicion, no squabbles, no innuendos, no 'song lashing'? Rather idealistic. But Amma paints the picture of a near perfect blend of co-wives in dialogues, where wife with

child consoles childless wife, and refers to her daughter as ‘our daughter;’ her children as ‘our children.’

“Do you harbour any hatred for me after all these decades as co-wives?”

“Oh Kakraba, No,” she begged... “may the gods forbid. And may such words not reach the ears of ancestors. Hatred for you? No. Kakraba. No. A little jealousy, yes. Even till today, I am human, Kakraba. You are the mother of all his children. And if...”

“Our children, Penyin. The children I bore with him belong to us all. Our children, Penyin.”

Penyin’s face broke into a grateful smile. “I know, Kakraba. But the creases and folds and marks of childbirth are on your belly, not mine. That is one reality that will never go away.”

A major source of stress in the novel is the stigma of childlessness, unnerving the 5th Wife of Pesewa who terminated a pregnancy at 18 (and now suffers side effects); and deflating Penyin. This explains why her husband brought in Kakraba. But it is on the Idan/Aggie affair that infertility wreaks the greatest havoc, shattering marriage bonds and spinning nightmares. The heavy toll this unleashes is enhanced by a mystical world of dreams, prophecies, black magic, sorcery. That is indeed the vehicle through which Amma Darko juxtaposes the real and the surreal.

The childlessness syndrome engulfing the Idan/Aggie affair is intertwined with a belief system that assumes the fulfillment of a prophesy. Its genesis can be traced to a botched attempt by the ancestors to intervene in an unacceptable Christian marriage. Years ago, Idan’s grandma saw the bad omen, but was branded a witch,

and barred! This explains bizarre happenings on the wedding day, and the sad plight of the couple. The gods are angry.

But the suspense Amma Darko creates with ominous events is gripping. The vehicle is spooky dreams, hallucinations, and nightmares laced with irregular movements of the time capsule. Aggie's regular nightmares, Ma's hallucinations, and the strange voices leap at the reader in breath-taking prose:

Aggie's muscles tightened involuntarily on the bed. She was still in the other world. Her heartbeat gained momentum. Ceaseless echoes. She was the non-player in the other world. She looked the other way to avoid the old face. Curtains of orange and blue ignited, hitting her in the eyes. A glowing flame of fire. The old face applauded wildly. A skeletal hand suddenly dragged the non-player onto the stage suspended in air.

In the case of Ma, her obsession with Papa's extra marital affairs with a lady called Flower, triggers voices, nightmares and paranoia with flora. Should she obey the voices and whack Flower in revenge? She could spill nectar, or is it blood? Hear Amma Darko in a spooky date with Ma:

Ma froze. She stared at the purple lily in her hand, severed from its stem. Blood. Where was the blood? The blood must be somewhere. Ma panicked. She couldn't trace the blood. She whirled around. No blood. She sniffed into the air, searching for a scent of the blood. No scent. She began to tremble. She had failed. The voice had ordered for blood. Where was the blood?

Whoosh! Whack! Whoosh! Whack! Search! Blood!

Look! Sniff! Blood! Blood! Blood!

One after the other, the blooming flowers fell. Lilies, roses, hibiscus, all till there was nothing more left to slice off. And still Ma found no blood.

Failed! the blood had escaped. She was slow. The blood was smart. It had gone. Where did it go?

Ma's hallucinations were the culminating point of a paralysis that drives her into a mental home. Several years ago, Pa's adventure with a girl less than half his age, caused it all. But this also took him on a similar journey, driving him to the margins of eccentricity. Alcohol took him over. *Something was happening to Pa. She had not the slightest idea what. But she felt a bleeding in her heart.* The bell tolled; and filled with a sense of failure, Pa ended it all by taking his life. That was long ago. Pa's shock must have been out of seeing a blooming Flower turn her back on him.

But the lessons thereof can only be deepened, with the final plight of Idan, whose life is cracked by extra marital stints with Randa, young enough to be his daughter. It is a world of sugar daddies whose sexual lives are ignited by girls, teenage girls. The reality dawns when Randa finds a young love, and jilts the man she loved at first sight. The parting words from Randa are chilling, and should tell sugar daddies that, contrary to self delusions of being loved by teenagers, it is all a game — a game with prostitutes. Hear Randa confess:

And let me repeat this to you for the very last time. I am not your girlfriend. I was never your girlfriend. It was a little necessary game I played on you. The game is finished, and so leave me alone.

For Pa, Flower's wilted love, and the sense of guilt driven by her parting words must have broken him. Her new demands for material wealth gave the game away. Listen to her parting words, and the crude reference to him for the first time, as an 'Oldie'. The game is over.

Her voice turned hostile and hoarse. "Get me the money, Oldie!" she warned furiously, "Do you think it was fun to allow you to get you to use my body as you did? Do you think it was fun to allow you to run your wrinkled old hands over me as if I was a whore and make me do all the shameful things with you? I, who am only a year older than your son? Would you like it if any man did the things you did with me with any of your daughters?"

These are not words of a lover. They are words of a teenage whore, a teenage masquerade play acting as girlfriend.

But the novel is replete with masqueraders and imposters, who unmask serially and betray a shocking underworld of utmost perversion: wives in league with male prostitutes, homosexual whores, as well as hirelings and imposters posing as evangelists and prophets. It is this topsy-turvy universe that unfurls in *Not Without Flowers*.

Such extremes of moral turpitude naturally beget equally horrid outcomes: heart breaks and mental diseases that shatter homes; the dreaded infection, HIV, naturally sets in, engulfing couples, consuming the young and old, smothering the guilty and guiltless, and leaving Amma Darko's world in a permanent state of suspense.

The lessons in the book make it compulsory reading by all in

search of dreadful social realities, in a veiled world of peace and tranquility.

Not Without Flowers is not without horrors and nightmares. “The world is indeed a nightmare,” says Amma Darko.

Kwesi Yankah
University of Ghana, Legon
November, 2006

“Sex gets people killed; put in jail; beaten up;
bankrupted and disgraced; to say nothing of ruined
– personally, politically and professionally.”

“Looking for sex can lead to misfortune and if you get
lucky to find it, it can leave you maimed, infected or
dead. Other than that, it’s swell.”

Edna Buchanan – *The Corpse had a Familiar Face.*

Prologue

CORA SAT TENSED UP behind the steering wheel of the old van. Dam's van. One of Dam's vehicles. Dam. So much in love with Randa. So giving; so generous.

Cora's blouse was damp from her tears. Cora, the second of the three of them; three years younger than Kweku, the oldest and only male; and thirteen years older than Randa, the youngest. Cora was perceived as an old maid who did not deserve to end up as such. She was a trained teacher, pretty and well groomed. At thirty-five, she should have been someone's wife and mother to a couple of yelling kids. But a greedy hand from years gone by, had twisted Cora's fate. Now, seated behind the steering wheel with her blouse completely wet, having given up the will to fight the tears, Cora was convinced. They are right.

For a long while they thought they could simply ignore the words of Ma, their mother. They deemed them to have come from the lips of a woman who was slowly failing in spirit.

"I have something for her!" was what Ma said to them. "And it must depart from my own hands into hers. Find her. She must understand the price. So that when I look into her eyes, what I see in there should be deep and sincere and complete. Because only then can I give it to her. And only then can she redeem herself and find her peace. Then when I depart this earth to be with my Maker, you, my children will also be free of any fear of having a funeral like the world has come to know it for me."

They knew what Ma meant. Yet they continued to ignore it

and pretend she never uttered those words. It was most convenient. Each of them had their own lives to live. Kweku, now a top executive, had a wife and kids of his own. Cora taught part-time at a private school and ran Ma's shop, built into the front wall of their home where she still lived. And Randa had just entered the university and was looking forward to completing and becoming Dam's wife. Then Cora began having a strange recurring dream. When Cora told Kweku about it, he knew they had to find her. They could no longer ignore Ma's words. Randa had Dam. He had Elsie, his wife, and their children. Of the three of them, Cora paid the heaviest price. Being nearest to Ma as she was living in the house with her and running her shop, Ma's spirit seemed to have chosen to make contact with Cora, to communicate. They couldn't ignore it.

They found her. That was not so difficult. Now the look that Ma was seeking had to be brought into her eyes.

Randa was in the back seat of the van. Her face reflected impassiveness. It was completely dry. She was known to be very sparse with tears when they were most expected. Dam was said to have once confessed that what he found most attractive about Randa was her seeming lack of emotion. Asked why, Dam simply replied that it enabled him to tolerate and contain his own self.

What could be the reason for a man to be attracted to a woman who almost never shed tears, Elsie once wondered, and added of Randa, "It is like she gathered up every piece of her emotions like moss one morning, placed it neat and compact into an iron safe, locked up the safe and threw the key into the deep blue sea."

A light pink student mattress was laid out on the floor of the van. Four double seats had been dismantled to make room for it.

A crisply ironed blue bed sheet covered the mattress with two soft pillows in matching cases at its head. A carefully folded men's cloth lay on Randa's lap. With her right palm she continually brushed and caressed it as she would a baby's back. Cora stole a glance at her younger sister in the driving mirror. Randa's harmattan face goaded Cora into more tears; her ducts letting out more to compensate for Randa's absent tears. Cora's heart always grieved for her younger sister. No little sister deserved to see so much in her early years and live with it for the rest of her life. Fate had snatched the innocence of childhood from under Randa's feet before she could understand the rules of any game. Now twenty-two, Randa appeared not to know how to laugh for laughter's sake or howl to purge inner pain.

Cora cast aside her thoughts and firmed her back against the seat. Randa looked up at the back of her older sister's head.

"Can you see them?" she asked, neither agitated nor anxious.

Contrarily, consumed with anxiety, Cora strained her neck to keep in sight, the gradually disappearing backs of the four men up the hill, at the foot of which the old van was parked. The leader, was the sixty-two year old farmer to whom the surrounding maize farm belonged. It was the second time he was leading such an expedition. He prayed it would be his last. They walked in a straight row. The closest behind the old farmer was Kweku. And behind Kweku, a thirty-something year old investigative reporter. The fourth man was the old farmer's son. He was a car mechanic by profession but could easily pass for a body builder. He was the main contact man and facilitator and the one who assured them that his father, as leader, was absolutely trustworthy and well-versed in the terrain. The old man, when he was told the story of Kweku and his two sisters, was deeply moved. The method they

were employing was not legitimate. But after listening to how all normal and regular avenues had yielded no positive result, the old man felt obliged to right a wrong being committed in the Almighty God's name. He had turned down the money that Kweku and his sisters offered him and his son; but on one condition: that the amount be used to inform the public about what was going on at the top of the hill. That was how Beam came to be a part of the group. But Beam underestimated the forewarning to him to come along with only his own self, a sharp eye and a healthy memory. In gross violation of this, Beam brought along a mobile phone and a small camera. Then in an ironic twist, Beam got more agitated by the farmer's son's stance that at the prices Beam claimed to have bought both the phone and the camera for, they could only have been smuggled into the country.

Beam didn't want to be seen as having patronized smuggled goods. After all, he was Beam, a nickname he earned for his expertise in shedding light on delicately hidden and secret issues. It wouldn't do for him to be seen to be indirectly encouraging tax evasion. This irritated the old farmer greatly. His concern was that Beam was given some basic rules, which Beam did not adhere to. If Beam couldn't do his job without his mobile phone and camera, he should not have agreed to join the group putting all of them at risk. So he gave Beam the option to either leave the items and join them, or return to where he came from. Beam's attempts to persuade the old man that the gadgets would pose no risk, was met with a swollen silence that spoke more volumes than words. So Beam gave in; strode back to the van and handed them over to Cora. When they set off again, they were armed with only the devices that were prescribed by the old farmer. His son carried a small pair of sharp shears and a ladies' hairpin. And in Kweku's pocket, was a tiny torch.

Till now the moon had lit the skies, but dawn was yet to break fully. The old farmer knew the terrain like the back of his hand. His father before him had farmed there too. It was family land. And as a young lad, he had worked there as a young farm hand. As a grown-up, he chose to remain in the village. He married from the extended family and had taken over the farm from his old father. When he also became a father, he dreamt and hoped that at least one of his three sons would not migrate to the city or any nearby town in search of greener pastures, but remain behind and take over from him when he, like his father before him, grew too old for the farm. Two of the sons migrated to the city. One chose to settle in a town nearby and remained close to home. He became a car mechanic and opened a big car workshop there. It broke the old man's heart. It was still mending as they headed up the hill. They ascended it in silence, still led by the rather agile old farmer. When he slowed down, they slowed down. When he walked fast, they walked fast. Then they arrived at a spot where the old man stopped suddenly and stretched out a hand for Kweku's torch. He knew exactly what he was looking for and why; because when he shone the light onto the spot, a barbed wire fence came into view. Without prompting, his son brought out the shears; and in one swift stride, moved to the fence near his father. Then as his father indicated, he snipped one point after the other. When he was done, he had made a gap of about four feet square in the fence. Without warning, the old man dropped onto his knees and proceeded to crawl through the gap. The son signalled for Kweku to follow. Beam crawled through next. Finally, the son followed. With all four of them on the other side of the fence, the old farmer resumed his leadership, trailed by the others. And just as he did, the rest also trod slowly. About a hundred meters away, what could best be described as a shabby

compound came into view. All around was dead quiet. The old man took to the left. The others followed. A little distance away, they spotted three brick and thatched huts. In front of these was a signboard. Its outline stood out clearly in the moonlight. The old farmer shone the torchlight onto its surface. "WCS Prayer Camp" was lettered in red paint against a white background. Beneath it in smaller blue letters, was the name written in full. It wasn't clear enough for them to read and time was not on their side. So they moved on as Beam cursed under his breath. That would have made a good shot.

The old farmer proceeded toward one of the huts, faithfully followed by the three. Then he halted before the wooden door of one hut. It was always firmly closed but never locked, and the old farmer knew this. He beckoned to his son who moved to the door. He held the knob firmly and turned it slowly and gently without a sound. It gave way. He pushed. The door stood ajar. The old farmer and his son exchanged knowing looks, communicating without words. The son went through the door, cast a brief look around and beckoned to Kweku to also enter. By now, Beam was boiling at his inability to capture anything on film. The story could be told more effectively with photos. The van; the farm; the hill; the wire fence; with and without the square gap; the signboard; the brick hut; the door, shut and unshut. All! It would have been sensational and probably won him a prize. What a wasted opportunity.

He entered the hut with a huge frown to join Kweku and the old farmer's son. The old farmer remained stationed outside the door. Inside the hut, the son led the way, followed closely by Kweku and Beam, all tiptoeing carefully. Then the farmer's son signaled to Kweku and stopped. He pointed down. Kweku looked and inhaled deeply to stifle a scream. He reflected briefly on how

the whole idea came to be.

It was during one of their many calls at the front gate of the camp. That was when they thought they could do business the normal regular way. This very smallish old woman approached them. She had apparently been watching and observing them for a while. She found out what they wanted and learnt of their frustration in getting it. She was a resident of the town and told them that no one from the town would send a relative to the camp even if the camp offered them money to do so. That was because everybody around knew what went on up there on the hill. She told them bluntly that their aim would not be accomplished through the regular means. She had been a regular observer of many similarly frustrated and helpless sons and daughters who had made the mistake of bringing their mothers, grandmothers and aunts there. They would have to either wait till they were granted the go ahead by the camp, or go about things the irregular way. Kweku and Cora told her that time was not on their side. They couldn't afford to wait till the camp decided. At which point the old woman told them about the old farmer and his son the mechanic.

Kweku knew what to expect inside the camp. The old woman gave him some information. But the reality offered its own blow. On the floor, where the farmer's son had pointed, was a figure. She was frail and huddled on a mat on the bare floor, fast asleep. There was no pillow for her head. Kweku shone the torchlight on her face. She was about sixty, with skeletal features, and completely bald, the hair on her head having been shaved off. Around each of her ankles, was an iron ring linked to a thick iron chain. Kweku's eyes followed the length of the chain to its opposite end. It was hooked through a hole in a huge blunt iron rod buried halfway into the concrete floor in the center of the hut. There were other

metal hooks in the hole from other chained ankles. No wonder the wooden door was never locked. There was no need to.

The frail old woman stank of stale urine. She must have wet herself several times while chained. Kweku's blood churned. The farmer's son cocked his head to one side. Kweku shook his head in response. They tiptoed to the next figure, also bald and huddled on a mat with no pillow. The ankle was also chained. Again Kweku shook his head. They moved on to the next figure, and the next, all women, all old and bald, all frail and chained, all haggard and stinking.

The ninth figure was asleep in a fetal position; as if subconsciously yearning for the warmth and security of a womb, having received too much lashing in the world. Kweku suffered a sudden violent bout of dizziness, and broke out in sweat. The farmer's son needed no telling. He placed an empathizing and assuring hand on Kweku's shoulder. Kweku touched a palm to his forehead to forestall the dizziness and knelt down close to the haggard figure. The stench dazed him. The farmer's son also got down on his knees beside Kweku. He signaled to Kweku to guide the torchlight to the keyhole of the padlock fastening the metal ring on the figure's ankle. Her kaba blouse, old and torn, hung loosely on her frail body. Kweku needed all his concentration not to be overcome by emotion and drop the torchlight and gather the weak figure in his arms. The farmer's son inserted one end of the hairpin into the lock's keyhole, his eyes intensely focused. A soft click sounded. Someone turned in her sleep. A chain rattled. All became quiet again. Then in the midst of the gloom, the farmer's son looked up and smiled at Kweku. Mission accomplished. He lifted the U-shaped bar and pivoted it to one side to remove the padlock. The figure's ankle came free from its iron bondage. Her eyes flicked open unexpectedly. Kweku and the farmer's son ex-

changed nervous looks. What if she failed to recognize Kweku and screamed. But she didn't. She simply searched their faces while hers remained bland, registering neither shock nor fear nor pleasure. Kweku brushed a hand against her hollowed cheeks. She didn't react. Her skin had become extremely coarse. Kweku began to cry. The farmer's son signaled Kweku to gain control of himself and pick up the figure. Kweku obeyed, still crying. She was so emaciated that she felt like a baby in his arms. They strode to the door no longer tiptoeing. Beam winced, replaying the images inside the hut over and over in his mind. They joined the old farmer at the door and together headed back to the wire fence. At the fence gap, the old farmer once again crawled out first. His son took the old figure from Kweku to enable Kweku also crawl out. Then Kweku knelt and received the old figure from the farmer's son through the gap. Then Beam also crawled out and finally the farmer's son. The old farmer led the way back down the hill, while Kweku held the frail old figure close to him as if a breath of space between them would let her be gone forever. They all remained quiet, until Beam, unable to hold his silence any longer, blurted, "I need some answers, pal, good answers. And since we will be parting company with the old farmer and his son soon, can I begin to ask my questions?"

No one responded.

Beam was not deterred. "What do the initials WCS stand for?"

"Whip to Conquer Satan!" the farmer's son replied straight-faced.

"What?" Beam yelled. "Whip? They whip those frail old women in there?"

"That is how they deal with Satan," the farmer's son replied.

"Kweku, you didn't talk about suspecting your old woman of

being a witch. Didn't you say she was mentally ill?"

Kweku couldn't reply.

The old farmer's son said, "Are you not versed in this kind of stuff? From the viewpoint of the people on the hill..."

"The prophets and prophetesses?"

"Whatever they deem themselves to be! To them, mental illness means possession by evil spirits."

"You mean they believe that it was when one was possessed by an evil spirit that one became mentally sick?"

"Yes."

"So in effect we haven't come far from the Stone Age at all, have we?" Beam blurted. "When holes were drilled into the skulls of the mentally sick to supposedly allow the evil spirit possessing the subject to depart?"

"Yes, pal. That is how close we still are to the Stone Age in the twenty-first century."

But Beam remained baffled. "I don't get it, pal. If it is a prayer camp, why don't they just pray for the inmates?"

"Oh, they do pray for them. They employ prayers and the recitation of verses to try to coax the evil spirit or talk it out of the person. Something like how the police might employ the strategy of talking a hijacker into freeing his hostages and giving himself up. It is when that fails that the police storm the place where the hostages are held."

"Which in this case, is the physical body of any of these women?"

"Yes."

Beam frowned and snorted, "It doesn't make sense!"

"It does to them!" the farmer's son went on, "To them, the evil spirit has sought refuge in the body of the supposed possessed person, who is probably only mentally sick. And the evil spirit is

in there because it feels comfortable...”

“Inside the person’s body?”

“Yes. So the idea of subjecting the person to the entire whipping is to make the physical body an uncomfortable abode for the evil spirit to continue its occupation. Which, it is hoped, will force it out.”

“An ‘if persuasion fails, force is applied kind of thing’?”

“Yes.”

Kweku hadn’t uttered a word all this while. He held on to the figure in his arms like an egg.

Beam snapped, “But if it is so obvious how Satan is dealt with there, I wonder why...I mean, why would any sane person want to take a relation there? They must have a signboard at the gate, don’t they? And Whip to Conquer Satan is too obvious to ignore, isn’t it?”

The old man spoke for the first time. “They have employed people who do a wonderful public relations job for them all over. Some operate around the psychiatric hospitals and target visitors seen to be well-to-do. They adopt all kinds of ways to convince these people that they are wasting their time and money at the hospital and recommend the camp.”

“Which brings me back to my point,” Beam exclaimed, “if after having been convinced, a sane targeted man, on arrival at the camp, sees a signboard proclaiming how Satan is conquered through whipping, shouldn’t something click in his mind?”

“If...” came in the old farmer, “But they don’t see that. Only the inner signboard reads that. All the signboards outside leading to the camp, and the one at the gate, has the same acronym WC S But beneath it, it reads, ‘We Conquer Satan’.”

Beam yelled astounded, “There are differing inner and outer signboards?”

“Yes.”

“What about visiting relations? Don’t they see it?”

“No, they don’t. They can’t. Once a patient is admitted, she is allowed no visitors until the alleged evil spirit vacates her body. Which is determined only by the prophets and prophetesses of WCS, and it sometimes takes forever.”

“Pal,” Beam turned and addressed Kweku, “Does it mean you were never allowed to see her when she was in there?”

“Never!” Kweku muttered.

“Relatives are often told that the sight of them would interfere and interrupt the exorcism process. Whatever food and money the relative brings along is collected at the reception with the promise to give everything to the patient. Of course the patient sees nothing of it. Especially not the cash. Meanwhile, for the period that a patient is there, the relations are expected to pay for their monthly upkeep.”

“What if the relations of a patient refuse to pay?”

“Normally the well to do relations pay. Many are sometimes just grateful that they had a place far away to deposit their mentally sick relative. But if the relations are poor and no money can be squeezed out of them, the patient is sometimes declared incurable and kicked out. In one such case, it was alleged that the evil spirits possessing the person could multiply and transfer to add to less harmful ones and exasperate the possessions of others previously possessed by milder evil spirits.”

“What if a relative wanted a patient discharged? Like how Kweku and his sisters wanted: a normal and regular discharge?” Beam probed further.

“That is not looked on kindly at all. Especially if the relatives seem quite well off and have been regular in the payment of the monthly upkeep fees,” the old farmer’s son replied, “The common

excuse given often is that the discharge ...what they normally describe as a premature discharge...is an interference in God's work and a sin."

"So once a relation commits the first blunder of bringing a 'patient' here, for spiritual healing, the patient is discharged only when the camp so permits?"

"Yes," the old farmer's son replied and asked his father, "Do you see the van?"

"Yes," the old farmer responded. "Hurry on ahead and have the back door opened and ready. One of the camp guards may go strolling along the fence and notice the intrusion and raise the alarm."

The farmer's son did as was directed and further advised Cora to turn on the ignition. The old man issued a final caution to Beam. "Just the story about the camp and the issue of the misconception about mental illness as possession by evil spirits. Nothing about the rescue and the involvement of my son and me."

Beam nodded obediently.

Randa and the farmer's son helped Kweku to place the haggard figure gently on the mattress in the van. Then Randa covered her with the cloth while Kweku shook hands and parted with the old farmer and his son. He got in the back of the van with Randa. Beam joined Cora in the front seat. Then Cora stepped on the clutch and put the gear into first and slammed her foot on the accelerator. The van screeched off along the rough dusty road. No one spoke till they hit the main tarred road, when the old woman, as if reacting to a telepathic message, opened her eyes which had remained shut till then. She scanned the faces above her, closed them again, and extended the corners of her lips into a beautiful, weak smile. That prompted Kweku to say to her, "We are all here, Ma. All three of us."

They rode on in silence as Ma drifted back to sleep. Probably the best and most comfortable sleep she had had in months. Soon, her light snoring filled the van. Then Beam, feverishly making notes on what was still vivid in his mind, lest he forgot anything, snapped, “I still don’t quite get it, pal,” turning to Kweku, “The whole scenario baffles me. I mean, the more I look at you three – you all seem to be sane and upright. Was bringing your mother to this camp the idea of your sisters? We do know that our women are more receptive to these prayer camps and ‘pray-for-me’ prophets. Was it them? You all seem to me to be solid, pal. Rational. What happened?”

If Beam was expecting a defensive reaction from the women, he was disappointed. Randa remained impassive; like a lump of clay.

Cora muttered, “That should tell you the extent of our despair. We were three extremely desperate siblings.”

Beam cast Randa another look. She was the only one who had still not spoken. Self assured and somewhat mysterious, something about Randa scared him. Beam shuddered at the thought of falling on her wrong side. Her pretty face shielded a deep and collected mind. A master planner. He directed his next question to her, knowing she might not oblige him with an answer.

“Why didn’t you send her to the Psychiatric Hospital?”

As Beam had expected, it was rather Kweku who responded. “Oh, we did. She was well taken care of there. But there were complex complications, just too many. Her medication helped greatly, but we had to bring her home. Presently I am the only one not living at home. Cora and Randa still live there. And they ensured that she took her medicine religiously.”

“So how did she end up here?”

Kweku sighed. “She fell sick. Seriously sick. We thought she was

going to die. So we began preparing ourselves for the worst.”

“Her funeral?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“The problems started.”

“With relatives?”

“No. Dreams.”

“Dreams?”

“Yes. Cora started having a haunting, vivid recurring dream, in which Ma had died and had been buried. We held a fine funeral for her but her spirit remained restless, hovering the earth and shedding tears because of what we, her children had done.”

Beam frowned. He was so bewildered by Kweku’s pronouncements that all he could do was stare agape, completely lost for words.

“In Cora’s dreams, we held a fine funeral for Ma, a funeral with flowers!”

Kweku went on.

“What?” Beam recovered instantly from his speechlessness.

“Yes. A fine funeral, with flowers at her bedside, flowers in church, wreaths on her grave.”

The strangest smile crossed Beam’s face. “Come again, pal! Please. I am not getting you at all. Flowers?”

“Yes. Flowers.”

Beam chuckled, too perplexed. “Pal, I am sorry but this doesn’t make sense. What is it with flowers? And in which part of this world is a funeral held without flowers?”

“See the insanity of it?” Kweku moaned, “Are you now beginning to understand why three... to borrow your own words... sane and solid adults did something so insane as bring their mother to this prayer camp?” His eyes watered. “Be it a single white rose,

a bunch of rich red roses, a carpet of bougainvilleas, a field of sunflowers, violets...whatever...our mother sets eyes on them, and she is sparked off.”

Beam’s shock tripled. “Your mother’s trigger element is flowers?”

Kweku looked into the fast disappearing distance from the moving van. “That is how sane and rational people can be drawn and driven to act insane and irrationally.”

“Or maybe no one is really ever completely sane.” Cora came in at last, “Maybe, each and every one of us has a little bit of insanity in us.”

“It was my wife’s sister who convinced us about this place,” Kweku resumed, “But we don’t blame her. Before we brought Ma there, we attended some of their miracle services. People testified so positively about the many healings that had occurred there. Our thought was to simply try it out there and see. If it worked, fine. If it didn’t, we would simply take her away. And we were given the impression there would be no complications. We decided unanimously. We may have also been driven by and blinded by our desperation. Or maybe too, deep down, we suspected and were afraid of some answers that might have come up if we probed too much. Answers that would have given us good cause not to bring her here. But we were at our wits end and unprepared for any reason not to try it out. Our options were too few for us to start cancelling some even before we had tried them out. How could we have a funeral without flowers for her when she died? Yet we couldn’t ignore the dreams Cora started having. Had we chosen to disregard them, it would have become a cross we would have had to carry for the rest of our lives. The cross of having offended Ma’s soul and wondering if her spirit had found eternal rest.”

“In other words, everything was arranged to enable you to

have a funeral with flowers for her one day?" Beam asked, and was given a shock by the voice that came in, Randa's.

"You trivialize it the way you put it!" she accused. "Everything was geared toward having our Ma healed."

Beam, taken completely off guard, stuttered, "Of course...of course."

Randa sniped further, "Do you know that a whole lot of the world's highly intelligent people end up in mental institutions? No! Let me put it the other way round. Do you know that many of the world's geniuses were at a point in their lives known to have belonged to a mental institution?"

Beam could only stare at Randa and nod gravely. The very pretty young woman gave him the chills.

"If a crisis is triggered," Randa went on, "and at the height of the mentally sick person's insanity, she spells out in a very sane manner, what, to her insane mind, would free her of the triggering element of her insanity..."

"Randa!!!" Cora snapped.

Randa shut up immediately, like a child realizing she had already talked too much.

Beam knew when not to pursue a line of questioning.

Kweku said, "Pal, you were brought in to write about the camp and expose their deception. You have enough material, I think."

Beam thought otherwise. He wasn't into writing generalized stories. Specifics were his hallmark: he had no photos, his information was sketchy and inadequate and incomplete. His instincts fed him a strong message that the crux of the matter was yet to unfold. And he trusted that reporter's instinct of his. He posed his last question. "Randa, I learnt that this van belongs to your boyfriend?"

Randa was clearly surprised at Beam's interest in the owner of

the van. But Beam was being directed by his reporter's instinct, guiding with its longer reaching nose.

"Yes. Dam." Randa confirmed curtly.

"Dam? As in the barrier that holds back the flow of water?"

"No, as in Damian shortened."

"So he is a transport owner?"

"No, he works with his father. He assists in the running of his father's business."

"Do you know where it is located?"

"In their home."

"Do you know the home?"

Randa became defensive. "Why all these questions? What has Dam got to do with the camp?"

Beam smiled. "This van, his van, played a very important role in the rescue operation of your Ma. Don't you think he deserves to be mentioned and acknowledged? Can't you see the significance? That, but for the fact that Dam had a van suitable for this kind of operation, you may have been compelled to go and look for one elsewhere and bring in other people into the plan. Which could have endangered the whole rescue attempt."

He won Randa over. "I don't know their home."

Beam frowned.

Randa went on quickly to explain. "We are very much in love with each other, but at the moment, I am not welcome in their home. Dam is dependent on his father, and his father has been trying to get him interested in the daughter of a business associate. So he won't take kindly to our relationship. Dam is hoping to establish his own business soon. Then when he is no longer dependent on his father, he will take me home and damn the consequences."

Beam nodded and closed the chapter.

The rest of the ride continued in silence.

Chapter One

SHE LITERALLY COLLIDED into him, seemingly unintentionally. Idan didn't know her. He had never set eyes on her anywhere near his office premises before. Yet, for a reason he couldn't quite put a finger on, Idan had the feeling that the collision was deliberate.

She didn't allow him breath and time to make sense of his hunch.

"Oh God! Sir! I am sorry!" she launched into a thousand and one apologies, "I am very sorry!" she wailed on, pleading and entreating, while Idan, baffled by both the clash and her reaction, studied her in confusion. He could have dismissed her as a mental case on the loose, but for her well-mannered demeanor and fluency, which contrasted sharply with her outlook. "I wasn't looking, Sir," she babbled on, apparently agitated by Idan's silence, "I had a lot on my mind. I don't usually bump into people this way, Sir. I am always careful. I shouldn't go about inconveniencing others with my problems. I am really sorry, Sir."

Idan thought to himself, 'If there was anything such as over-apologizing, this ought to be it.' And laughed.

The woman frowned, bemused.

Idan remarked quickly, "I should have paid enough attention too." He made to ask her whom she was looking for and whether she had lost her way. But he took another look at her and quickly changed his mind. More questions would drag their conversation and further chatting with the woman emitting odd vibes was the last thing he needed.

“It’s all right,” he muttered curtly, “These things happen sometimes.” And made to walk away.

Her right hand shot out like a serpent’s tongue and stopped him in his step. Idan turned and faced her, amazed. She smiled nervously and told him her name. Idan didn’t catch it but didn’t bother to ask her to repeat it. He had no interest at all in getting to know her better. But he felt obliged to reciprocate, out of courtesy, so he told her his name too. He regretted it right away, because the woman felt led on and announced rather pretentiously that she was an actress.

‘One hell of an obscure actress you are then,’ Idan thought to himself. He was conversant with Ghanaian films and drama productions on the television and on no screen, big or small, could he recollect the woman’s face. He decided against telling her his profession. He really wanted to get away from her. “I must be on my way, Madam,” he stated flatly, and strode off so briskly that the woman appeared lost for words. Back in his office and seated behind his table, he reflected on the drama and its leading player and realized that, all he could actually remember about the woman was her alleged profession and the huge blond Afro wig that she was wearing, which was the main cause of her odd appearance. It was puzzling. From the little he could recollect of her face, she could be described as pretty. She didn’t need that wig. Not only was it off-putting, she also looked absolutely ridiculous in it. Strange! he thought. And turned his attention back to his work. But something else came to mind and robbed him of his concentration: an argument he had had with his wife that morning.

It was all about their childlessness and his reluctance and persistent refusal to subject himself to fertility tests and possible treatment, if he were found out to be the guilty one. His wife had concluded that it had to do with the male ego complex.

That the very suspicion that he could be the one responsible for their childlessness would dent his self-esteem as a complete man. His wife had a point, but that was only part of the reason for his reluctance. The greater part of it was his mother. The image of the look that registered on her face when he broached the issue with her had never ceased to haunt him. A look that always returned whenever the issue cropped up in conversations. It spoke volumes. The fear and sadness of being seen as the mother of an incomplete man, a man whose ability to inseminate his wife was being called into question; an insult to his manhood and to the womb that carried him for nine months. Then his wife made the matter worse. Without first discussing it with him, and oblivious to the fact that he had already broached the issue with his mother, she went seeking Sisi's support in her quest to get him to undergo the tests, urged by her erroneous faith in the solidarity of women under every circumstance. Sisi didn't tell her that her son had already told her all about it. In Sisi's own words to him later, "I told her...no! I warned her to let what she had told me remain between us; that she was not to go and tell the world, including her family, that my learned and respected and adored son was incapable of performing one of Nature's free magical acts."

Idan chuckled at the recollection of his mother's words. How Aggie could have made the mistake of underestimating the bond between him and Sisi still baffled him.

He sank back in his seat and reflected on the irony of fate that man sometimes found bestowed upon him. The many irresponsible men doing it with any foolish young woman willing to co-operate with them to produce babies they neither wanted nor could cater for. The hell he was going to...

"Grrrrrrrrrr..." the telephone rang, cutting short his reminiscence.

He picked the receiver. "Hello."

"Hello," a female voice responded.

"This is Idan. Hello!"

Silence.

"May I know to whom I'm speaking?"

The female voice at the other end sniggered and cooed, "Do you mean you are unable to recognize my voice? How can you forget me so soon? A day has not even passed and I am your past tense already?"

Idan couldn't believe his ears. He gasped for breath in shock. "You?"

"Who else?"

"How did you get my number?"

She laughed.

"Why have you called me? What do you want?"

"Why are you so upset?" she cried, "I wanted to get to know you better, so I took the trouble to find your office and obtained your number. Is that so wrong?"

It dawned on Idan immediately that the best way to deal with the blond Afro-wigged woman was to shelve politeness and courtesies and deal straight and rough with her. "Look, Madam," he raged, "we bumped into each other in the corridor. We apologized to one another politely and wished each other well. You went your way and I went mine. Why the hell should you go looking for my office and my number? Stay away from me. Do you get it? Away!" and he banged the telephone.

He was breathing hard and sweating. He settled back and tried to recollect what he was reminiscing about. Yes! Aggie and his mother and the hullabaloo about fertility tests, not a very comfortable recollection either. He pulled a file from a batch on his table and studied the cover notes without really seeing them. He

gave up and returned it to the batch. Two women, one of them his better half, the other a complete stranger; one of them haunting his psyche, the other tormenting his spirit. Did God overlook giving him a clue about these women who would make a misery of his life that day and...

“Grrrrrrr...”

He started. The blond Afro-wigged woman again. It had to be her. He picked the up receiver, trembling with fury. “Hello!” he bellowed.

He was right. It was she. He banged the telephone. Then he called the front desk and directed the receptionist not to put through any call from the last caller. His thoughts reverted to his wife. Aggie had probably told her family he was or could be the one responsible for their childlessness. The suspicion left a sour taste in his mouth. Aggie was really...

“Grrrrrrr...”

It had to be someone else, Idan reflected, having directed the front desk not to put through any call from the blond Afro-wigged woman. He received the call.

“Hello.”

He was right. It was the receptionist. “Sir,” she said softly, as if a gun was being held to her head, “There is a woman here demanding to come up and see you. She appears a little strange Sir, and she sounds like the one whose calls you asked me not to put through to you, Sir.”

Idan’s blood began to boil. “Is she wearing a silly blond Afro wig?” he snapped.

“Yes Sir!” the receptionist hissed.

Idan didn’t know what to think. He had heard of women who went around offices offering dubious services to big men they suspected to be not adequately serviced in their various marital

homes. But such women were noted for being discreet and not bringing unnecessary attention to themselves. If this woman was one such dubious service provider, then she must be truly stupid to have adorned herself in such an outrageous and conspicuous wig. Who would want to risk sampling whatever product she might have to offer, with all that attention drawn to herself?

“Tell her that I said I am not willing to see her.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And ask her politely to leave.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“If you sense trouble, tell her you will call security.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She didn't make trouble. As soon as she was told that Idan was not willing to see her, she thanked the receptionist politely and left.

Chapter Two

TO MAA CHERIE, owner and proprietress of Maa Cherie Hair Salon, Randa was like a block. Like her older sister, Cora, both of whom were loyal and regular customers at the salon, Randa was also very pretty. But like the block that she was in Maa Cherie's eyes, Randa was blunt, square and dead.

Maa Cherie valued customers like Randa, who never made excessive and unrealistic demands. Like those who would come with weak limp hair; turn down every advice for a hair treatment on grounds of lack of money to pay the extra cost, then insist on their lifeless strands being turned into an Oprah look-alike. There were also those who would wail like hyenas at the slightest change in the water temperature or the scent of a shampoo. Randa never complained. Yet, Maa Cherie could never recall having seen Randa smile. Not a smile from the heart; not good hearty laughter. At best, all that Randa gave for a smile was a tiny extension of the left corner of her lip. Even for her boyfriend Dam, who sometimes dropped her at the salon, it was all that he normally got for a thank you. So when Randa entered the salon that day, brimming with enthusiasm and showing all of her teeth, the salon went dead quiet with shock.

"Oh! Maa Cherie!" she caroled, casting a desperate look around at the ten customers who had arrived before her and had to be attended to before her, "Never more than today do I wish your past attempt to introduce scheduled appointments had worked."

Maa Cherie's chief apprentice, nicknamed Fingers, standing behind her Madam, whispered, "Did the good Lord descend into her den in the night?"

"You should never have given up on your attempt," Randa went on, either not seeing or perhaps seeing but deliberately ignoring Maa Cherie's look of absolute awe. "I am very hard pressed for time, Maa Cherie. Very hard pressed. Oh!"

Maa Cherie knew she had to say something. But her tongue felt like a ton inside her mouth. Her voice simply vanished, dissolved by her astonishment. Maa Cherie couldn't help thinking, that had to be it! Like mother like daughter! Randa was beginning to follow in their Ma's footsteps. It was in the family.

Fingers, noticing her Madam's dumbfoundedness and the curious stares Randa was attracting from the other customers, quickly intervened to save the situation.

"Randa, why? Do you require a special perm treatment and cut?" she asked.

"No!" Randa blurted out, "I want it rolled and set today for styling tomorrow afternoon around 4:00 pm. I must really have it freshly styled around 4:00 pm. I must look too good to be resisted."

That snapped Maa Cherie out of her fleeting trance. For the first time ever, Randa had made a special request.

"Do you now see why I tried with the scheduled appointments? Customers always come with such similar needs, wanting their hair styled at particular times. But if other customers came before that particular customer, how can I ignore them and attend to that particular one?"

Maa Cherie's attempt to introduce scheduled appointments at her salon attracted as many headlines as a prominent politician caught

in a naughty act. Maa Cherie had made the attempt following her return home from the United States of America, where she had stayed briefly. Gossip had it that a cousin of hers who was residing in Chicago, had tried to hook Maa Cherie up with a middle-aged Ghanaian man also resident in Chicago, who had been widowed two years before. On her arrival in Chicago, Maa Cherie was met with an unpleasant surprise. Not only had the man's family quickly found him a new wife from his hometown, who was soon to join him in the USA, but also, that the man, still grieving for his dead wife, had resorted to seeking solace in the bottle.

Maa Cherie thought about her successful hair salon back home. She had entrusted it into the hands of a colleague, who was not only giving her trouble, but also Fingers couldn't get along with her at all. To add to it, when she went combing the job market, she soon realized that all that was available for her were cleaning and babysitting jobs. She, who was boss in her own salon back home; who was respectfully referred to as, "Madam". She, who was the proprietress and owner of the salon, should end up cleaning in America? If the plans for the arranged marriage had fallen on the rocks, why should she remain in the USA and exchange the dignity and comfort of her own business with a cleaning job in the USA? Not to mention the headaches with immigration inevitably looming, when the visitor's visa she had been issued with expired. She made up her mind and returned home only to find herself branded crazy, for leaving the USA willingly. Who wasn't aware of the many young and old who were prepared to go to any extent to be issued with a USA visa? In addition to the desperate attempts to win a visa lottery, there were those willing to pay thousands of dollars to visa contractors for an entry visa. Many more were those who would fast every fortnight and dole out millions of cedis to self-proclaimed prophets who often made

promises so ridiculous, it spelt desperation for the people who chose to believe them. All this! And Maa Cherie, after successfully entering and setting foot on American soil, left on her own accord? There had to be something wrong with her.

So such was the perception in people's minds about Maa Cherie, when she attempted to introduce and implement her scheduled appointments at the salon. The chitchat about it followed the same pattern.

Two fishmongers at a fish market were overheard saying, "Didn't I tell you she couldn't be completely sound up there?" the shorter of them remarked, touching a finger to her forehead, "She set foot on American soil; left without being chased out; returned empty handed, without even one cowboy hat; and now look at her trying to change us. Hairdressing salon too, should we book appointments? *Ebei!* Next thing you know, the chop bar keeper and the public latrine caretaker will also be insisting on scheduled appointments. Then with the latter, we will begin to see who really understands the word: 'control', best in Ghana."

"They say she said that was what was done in Chicago."

"Nonsense! Is Accra Chicago? Is Ghana America? Nonsense!"

It didn't have to do with the apparently passionate love of Ghanaians for their legendary Ghana-time. A love so strong that, was Ghana-time human, he would undoubtedly have been crowned *Nkosohene*. It was also about the Ghanaian woman who viewed the whole saga as treacherous interference. After all, next to the market place, the salon was probably the next best place that offered Ghanaian women the opportunity to band together and pour the acid and slime out of their systems. And no Ghanaian woman was willing to tolerate the nonsense of a disruption of that forum. Not even for a culture that pertained to the USA. So

a final conclusion was drawn in the gossip circles. Maa Cherie was crazy. Why else would she want to spoil such a party where, all that one needed prior to a visit to the hair salon, was a wise investment in a pack of cotton stubs, to clear out every milligram of wax hoarded up in any crook inside the ears? A good treat at the hair salon did not necessarily only mean a good hairdo. Oh no! It also meant a good load of sumptuous gossip.

Maa Cherie got the message fast. The first customer she tried to convince to book an appointment in the spirit of time consciousness, clucked her tongue in utter dismay, chuckled cynically and walked away; reserving her comments to herself. She was a well-groomed woman.

The second customer handed her a big surprise on a silver platter: “*Tweaaaaa!*” wailed the not so civil and educated young woman, as if in mourning, “*Aaah! Ebei!* My hair too that I want to do small, I should waste time on Telecom telephone or money at Space to Space to call you first? And say what? Maa Cherie, please, I want to inform you that I will be coming tomorrow at 11:00 am sharp, to do my hair? *Aaah!* What if just before I set off, my little son Kokofu tells me he wants to pooh-pooh? Do you want me to say, ‘Kokofu, wait eh! Tell your pooh-pooh to wait eh! Because I must leave now in order to be at Maa Cherie’s hair salon at 11:00 am sharp?’”

Maa Cherie promptly shelved her progressive thoughts. She never brought the matter up again. Funny that Randa should be the one to come and resurrect it at the salon. And on no other day as the day the salon saw her teeth in a very good smile for the very first time.

“You want it washed and set today?” Maa Cherie asked again.

“Yes.” Randa replied.

“And styled tomorrow around 4:00 pm?”

“Yes.”

“Do you necessarily have to wash and set it today?”

“I won’t have the time tomorrow morning. What if I came in late and met ten customers like now? I really must have it styled around 4:00 pm tomorrow.”

“And the speed boat ride through hell?” Fingers came in.

Randa frowned.

Maa Cherie laughed.

“Fingers meant the drying. When will you go under the drier?”

“I can go under for a few minutes after the setting and top up tomorrow. But the 4:00 pm factor is essential for me. Very important.” She suddenly sounded distant, the initial gaiety all gone. As if a light switch controlled her moods. One second on; next second off.

Maa Cherie said light-heartedly, “Which implies that my babies are going to spend the night with you, Randa.”

Randa frowned again.

“The rollers,” Fingers chipped in with a giggle.

The left corner of Randa’s lips extended into what the salon had become used to as her version of a smile. “Yes,” she muttered, “I suppose so.”

“Then you will have to go and return a little later Randa, when I am done with most of the customers. Can you imagine how many rollers I’ll be left to work with if about five customers with similar demands should go spending the night with my babies?” Maa Cherie added.

Randa said she understood, and made Fingers promise to see to her as soon as she came back, even if new customers had come to add to those she had come to meet.

“Which means that the first new customer who comes after Randa has left, must be told there was someone before her,” Maa Cherie directed Fingers.

Fingers nodded.

When Randa made to leave, Maa Cherie passed a comment about Cora. “She didn’t come to have her hair done last week. Is everything all right?”

“Oh yes!” Randa assured Maa Cherie, “She has been a little busy of late, that’s all.”

“And your mother?” Fingers asked, “I heard she is back home.”

Maa Cherie’s reaction was one of awe and complete surprise. “You brought her back from the hospital?”

“Yes,” Randa replied. She was nervous but it didn’t show. Just like none of her emotions showed. They didn’t bring Ma home from the Psychiatric Hospital, but they had allowed that impression to persist. Together with Kweku and Cora, they thought it best that the less people knew about where Ma had been the better. Kweku in particular, was desperate not to be seen to have also been taken in by the prayer camp ploy. It could cast a slur on the perception of others about his ability to make the correct decisions under extreme pressure. Especially with regard to his position at his work place and the social status he enjoyed. Just as Beam had also wondered why three solid and rational siblings, as they were, could have fallen for the dubious prayer camp, in spite of the many news headlines of the horrors that went on in some of them. Yet how could any person who had not been faced with the difficult situation, the dilemma and complex choices they were faced with, fully understand what drove them to such desperate lengths. How could they explain their fear of finding themselves driven to bar flowers at their mother’s funeral one day. How could

the world understand, that they had to do it for the sake of their mother's spirit, which lived on after the flesh was gone. And of their own individual spirits too? Their entrenched belief that they could render their mother's soul forever restless, should they defy her and organize a funeral with flowers for her one day, when she had not been healed. A healing they now knew, depended on bringing to fruition, those words she had once uttered.

Many knew that Ma had been undergoing treatment at the Psychiatric Hospital. Only a handful knew that, driven by despair, when Ma became very sick and seemed to be on the verge of death, they flung out all rational thinking to give the prayer camp on the hill a try.

Ma's trigger element, which abounded everywhere, also compounded their stress. And even though it turned out to be a grave mistake, they did it for her, for themselves and for Pa, whose soul had gone ahead into the other world.

"So is she all right now?" Maa Cherie probed.

"Yes," Randa responded curtly. Then suddenly, she flashed another teeth-showing smile. And sounding upbeat as if her mood switch was back on, rejoined gaily, "She is not healed completely yet, but she will be. She will be. We are working on it." And turned and started towards the salon exit, still wearing her rare smile.

As soon as she was out of the salon, Fingers, whose dexterity with customers' hair earned her that nickname, howled, "Yeeeh! Elijah must be doing the boogaloo up there, Madam. Yeeeh! Since when has Randa been coming here? Yet I can swear upon my mother's...hell! God forbid! My mother is not dead. Stupid me! Let me swear upon my grandmother's grave. She is dead. I swear..."

The whole salon shook with loud laughter.

Chapter Three

SYLV PO SHOT up from his sleep like one stung. It was as much from the shrill of his telephone as the growl of Let-them-say, his limping dog. Sylv Po was the popular presenter of the private radio station Harvest FM's "Good Morning Ghana" show. And when it came to Let-them-say, it released from its throat, the sound its master had nicknamed the staccato growl, only to register its irritation at something, which in this case, was the continuing loud noise of the buzzing telephone. And Let-them-say was not the only irritated one. Sylv Po swore angrily to himself. He had no idea what time it was, but he knew for certain that the hour was unholy. Whoever it was at the other end of the line, had better have a very good reason for disturbing his sleep at that time of the night. He snatched the receiver off its hook and switched on his bedside lamp with the other hand. The light illuminated the face of his white and gold wall clock. The time aggravated his annoyance.

"Hello!" he barked into his mouthpiece, a bark so perfect that Let-them-say, mistaking it for dog talk, barked back.

The sound of the voice at the other end, got Sylv Po struggling and succeeding only with much difficulty, to suppress his own growl and the unprintable word that almost shot forth from his lips.

"You?" he bellowed.

"Yes," the producer of his GMG show, Muff, cooed. "It's me. The whole of me." He chuckled.

Sylv didn't get the fun of it at all. "You?" he yelled again, "You of all people who should know better? Calling me at this hour? Then the reason better be real good, Muff. It better be."

As his producer, Muff should be the last person to want to disturb Sylv's sleep, knowing it could affect the presentation of the early morning show. The reason for Muff's call had to be worth the risk.

"Tame the wildness in you Sylv!" Muff chortled, "Could I still be producing you if I was that stupid?"

Sylv smiled wryly to himself. "Okay, what is it?"

Muff laughed. It irritated Sylv. "Muff!" he howled.

Let-them-say growled again. A low staccato one.

"All right! All right! Keep your cool!" Muff teased, "Now here it comes! A bomb blast! Ready?"

"M-u-u-u-u-f!!!"

"A lady just left my..."

"Wha-a-a-a-t?"

Muff had to quickly hold the receiver away from his ears for a few seconds to save his eardrum. Then he placed it back to his ear and drawled, "Are you still there in one whole piece?"

"The hell I am still there in..."

"Sylv!" Muff cut in firmly.

"Don't Sylv me!" Sylv exploded. "You woke me up at this unholy hour when your dead father's spirit is probably cleaning the feet of the wicked old fire boss in hell, just to update me on your bedroom nonsense? Are you...?"

"Hold it! Sylv! Hold it!" Muff barged in.

Sylv sensed some seriousness. He checked himself and obliged.

"I am your producer. Remember?" Muff went on, "Do you think I'll risk something so stupid and have you go croaky and

groggy on the show in the morning?”

He gained Sylv's full attention. "Okay, I am listening." Sylv muttered.

"Good. So, as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted by you..." They both chuckled. "...a lady just left my humble flat. She was my mate at the Radio and Television school. I hadn't seen her for God knows how long. Out of the blue she gave me a call. She was scared and sounded it. She claimed it was urgent and pleaded desperately to meet with me. And consequently materialized here at my door at around 11:00 pm." Sylv had mel-
lowed, but he wasn't encouraged by what Muff had divulged so far and slowly began to seethe. You don't receive a call at about 1:30 am to listen to the tale of a woman who was at a man's flat at 11:00 pm and not feel like whacking the caller's head with the receiver. He exhaled loudly into the receiver. Muff ignored the clear message of impatience it conveyed.

"When she called," he went on, "I suggested we meet for drinks somewhere. I even asked her to choose the venue. But she refused. She said it was too risky. When I asked her why, do you know what she said?"

"No Muff!" Sylv drawled, "I don't know what she said, which is why I am waiting for you to tell me so I can go back to bed."

Muff ignored the sarcasm. "She said she couldn't be seen in public, that she needed to be very careful. So I suggested my place. She agreed. I gave her the directions. She got here around 11:00 pm. And she was dressed as ...oh Sylv! You won't believe this. But I hope no one saw me let her into my flat. They will think I solicited her services."

Sylv Po roared with laughter. "She came dressed as a woman of the night?"

"Oh Sylv! You won't believe it. A shimmering gaudy pink

skirt, all the way up to you know where. And on her head, a wig so huge and so platinum blond, Dolly Parton couldn't compete. Plus all the fanciful frills. Bright sea blue eye shadow; lipstick as gaudy red as blood; false nails like perfect claws and eye lashes a whole mile long."

Muff gained Sylv's complete attention. He was doubled over in laughter. "Do you know why she went through all that trouble?"

"Yes," said Muff, "She has gone into hiding right here in Accra."

"Why?" Sylv shrieked, "For what? Stealing? Fraud? Murder?"

Muff chuckled. "Do you think you can put on your GMG cap now?"

"Is it that hot?" Sylv asked.

"Hotter!" Muff blurted, "She went into hiding after escaping from the claws of her sisters-in-law."

The laughter in Sylv Po's voice died. "Did she say why?" he asked.

"Do you now grasp why I had to wake you up at this unholy hour?" Muff challenged. He knew he had scratched the surface of Sylv's curiosity. And when that happened, Sylv was like a baby seeking his breastfeed.

"Muff please, let's not go back there," he begged.

"All right! Are you well seated?" Muff goaded.

"Well-balanced through and through!" Sylv responded.

"Pesewa Farms!" Muff blurted.

Sylv frowned. "Pesewa? The same filthy rich Pesewa who just died?"

"Yes."

"What of him? How does he come into all this?" Then added,

“Did I tell you the gamblers were already betting on how long his corpse would remain in the mortuary before he gets buried?”

“You don’t mean it!”

“Believe me Muff. There is talk of how long it would take for his children abroad to come down. The planning. The expected extravaganza. Then the anticipated war that is certain to break out over his property and all that.”

“How sickening!” Muff spat. “What else did you hear?”

“Like what?” Sylv asked.

“Like the cause of his death?”

“Heart failure. Isn’t that what we all heard? That he passed away peacefully in his sleep?” Sylv inquired.

“Yes,” Muff murmured, “All neat and pretty, isn’t it? A fine and noble and peaceful end to a great life.”

“Oh yes,” Sylv agreed, all traces of sleep completely gone, “Lucky fellow. Sixty plus; filthy rich; multiple wives; good life! No concubines though, I heard.”

“And you heard right,” Muff concurred, “They were all taboo to Pesewa; lovers, girlfriends, chicken-soups, concubines. If he wanted a woman, he simply made her his wife. Period.”

“Which should leave him with very little to moan on about with his Maker, I should suppose,” Sylv commented, “Unless he should end up down there at you know where, Muff. With you, dear old man.”

“Sylv...Sylv...Sylv!” Muff sang, “I know I push you too hard sometimes to deliver your possible best on the GMG show, for which you probably hate me to the bones. But do you have to take it out so cruelly on my poor late father too?”

They both laughed.

“And now three hot news items for you, Sylv,” Muff resumed.

“I’m all ears.” Sylv sniggered.

“One,” Muff began, “The last time my old man got in touch with me in spirit, he was still up there with the hallelujah choristers. Indeed, Gabriel was seriously considering including him with his fine baritone voice in the choir. So you see, he is not down there with the fire boss.”

“And two?” Sylv prompted.

“The woman; my mate...”

“Your pseudo call-girl?”

“Yes. She was married to Pesewa. He made her wife number five just over a year ago.”

“Holy Moses! If she was your mate, then she must have been about half his age.”

“Yes.”

“Then some do really have it all, don’t they?” Sylv joked. “Sixty something years, with an early thirties fine and well-groomed educated woman for a fifth wife? Gosh! Why does luck smile so brightly on some people?”

“Ask luck!”

“Nonsense!”

They laughed together.

“Did she tell you why the sisters-in-law were after her?”

“Are you seated?”

“Mu-u-u-u-f-fl!!”

“Okay. They think she deliberately overworked him...if you know what I mean...knowing his heart couldn’t...”

“Withstand the heat?”

“Need I say?”

“And sent him packing to his Maker before his scheduled time?”

“Sort of.”

“Oh dear! And the third?”

“The third wife? Just joking. Okay, here comes. Hot news number three. 5th Wife insists Pesewa didn’t die peacefully in his sleep of heart failure as his family had put out and wants the country to believe.”

“Oh! Oh! This doesn’t smell good, Muff. Did your mate, the 5th Wife, perhaps do him in? Finished him off pronto?”

“No. According to her, Pesewa precipitated his heart failure with a concoction of drugs.”

“Whaaat!!!”

“Put more bluntly like she did, old Pesewa, according to my mate, did himself in.”

“As in he committed suicide?”

“Yes.”

“Then the family probably didn’t want the country to know about his dishonorable death,” Sylv stated.

Muff agreed.

“Oh my! My! My! The whole Pesewa Farms? How unbelievable!”

“Believe!”

“Do you have any idea what drove him to it? Did she tell you? I mean, with five loyal women at his beck and call and all that wealth? How could he have done that?” Then it hit Sylv that 5th Wife could be lying. “Muff do you suppose that your mate was absolutely sure of what she was saying?”

“Yes,” Muff stated flatly. “Don’t ask me why, because I don’t know. I just know it; that she is not lying.”

Sylv digested that briefly and asked cautiously, “Muff, are you suggesting we debate whether Pesewa’s death was a suicide or not on the GMG show?”

Muff delayed his response.

“It will sicken and disgust many listeners,” Sylv went on, “I agree that the combination is juicy, Muff. Pesewa, his death, the suspected suicide, his family’s attempt to cover it up. All combined, real hot. But hot enough to offend sensibilities. And that will not be good for the show.”

Muff took his time to respond. “Sylv?”

“Yes, Muff.”

“You are a twerp.”

Silence.

“How long have we worked together?”

Sylv ignored the question.

“Do you think your so called juicy combination was what I wanted discussed on the GMG show?”

Silence.

“Should I go on?” Muff asked.

“I am listening,” Sylv spoke at last.

“All right. First point of interest: Why should a man of his stature want to die? Decide to die? If indeed he did take his own life.”

Sylv, baffled and mellowed, wondered in which direction Muff was steering him.

“If it was suicide as my mate claimed, then was it just for the sake of saving the family from the dishonorable record of a suicide in the family that they risked lying about the cause of Pesewa’s death? Or are they covering up something?” Muff wondered.

“Are they?” Sylv asked, becoming suspicious that maybe Muff knew more. He was right.

“My mate thinks so.” Muff revealed. “The big why.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“Brace yourself. Pesewa tested positive, prior to his death; according to my mate, his 5th Wife.”

Sylv's entire body jerked up. "Positive as in..."

"HIV." Muff finished off.

"Holy Moses!" Sylv hissed.

"And his sisters have concluded that my mate, being who she is, as the youngest, most attractive and open minded one, must have gone sleeping around..."

"...gotten infected and transmitted it to Pesewa?"

"Yes."

"And you? What do you think? Considering the extent she went through to disguise herself, and make it safely to your flat door, she must have divulged a lot. What have you concluded from the long talk you had with her?"

"Nothing."

Sylv roared out his frustration. Let-them-say's head cocked up sharply. It studied its master briefly and settled its head back onto its outstretched paws. That was one hell of a strange vocabulary its master spoke. Better not respond. That was definitely no dog talk.

"Nothing?" Sylv shrieked, "Muff! Do you mean to say you did not ask her the first obvious question?"

"Which is?"

"Oh Muff! How did she know her husband committed suicide? Did he leave a suicide note?"

"He sent her a letter through the expedited mail service the evening of the night he took his life. It arrived in the morning following his death. The night prior to the one he killed himself, he spent it with her."

"5th Wife?"

"Yes."

"Did they do it?"

"Sex?"

“What else?”

“No. They didn’t. According to her, he hadn’t touched her for over three months. She didn’t think much of it considering his age and the fact that four other wives were constantly waiting in line for the same services. But now she thinks he suspected his HIV status and had a test as far back as three months ago. Which showed positive. And as sometimes happened, he was advised to repeat the test at another time for confirmation, which he did three months later. His positive status was confirmed in the morning of their last night together. He must have contemplated and planned the suicide a long time ago.”

“Did she show you the note?”

“No. It wasn’t just a note. It was a long letter. She held it for me to see. She said some parts were too personal and intimate to share with me. But she read me portions of it. I noted it down word for word. She said on their last night together, he went on about how scared he was of his own shadow and ...”

“Pesewa scared?” Sylv interjected.

“She said he seemed overwhelmed with despair. As if a thunderbolt had struck and robbed him of his zest for life and left him with no will to live. Listen to the portion she read to me.”

“Is it long?”

“No. ‘...I took this decision after careful deliberation and with a clear head. My chosen path is to just hasten the inevitable. I don’t want to become a burden on any of you. Especially you. That would be worse. I cannot wait for the disease to defeat me; take over and claim my body. That will be worse. I have destroyed people in business gambles. I didn’t become what I am today by waiting for problems to solve themselves. I solved them before they destroyed me ...’. There is another portion. It wasn’t only the sisters-in-law guilty of suspecting her as the source of his

infection. The man apparently did too.”

“Pesewa you mean?”

“Yes. He inferred it. And I think I agree with her. Listen, ‘...good care of yourself. I am sorry I cannot be with you when your time comes. Don’t take the same path I took. For me it was a necessity but it is not the best. Live to the final moment ordained for you. I have bequeathed you with enough resources. Your sister should be able to take good care of you till you join me. I will be waiting. I am sorry I pushed you into it. In a way, I am the cause. I was too old to make you adequately happy ...’ Get it?”

“You mean he died believing that his fifth wife infected him?” Sylv reflected.

“Do you have a different inference?” Muff asked.

“No,” Sylv declared, “So now what? Has she taken the test?”

“She is in the process, but her immediate concern is that she thinks her sisters-in-law are looking for an opportunity to maltreat her. They never liked her from the start, for obvious reasons. And I am sure they were not the only ones who concluded that she married Pesewa solely for his money.”

“And what do you think I think?” Sylv snorted, “That she married him for the love of his wrinkles and gray hair?”

“That is beside the point Sylv. Let’s tackle where we come in. Why she felt she needed me.”

“Okay.”

“Pesewa’s older sister has declared the need for the 5th Wife to undergo a special widowhood purification rite.”

“Special?”

“In other words, significantly different from that to be undergone by the four older wives.”

“Why?”

“That is the million-dollar question.”

“Did they give a special reason?”

“Yes. That the 5th Wife was his favorite wife.”

“And is that surprising?”

“Stop interfering. She was also the only wife with whom Pesewa had no children.”

“So?”

“That is why she is hiding.”

“It doesn’t fit, Muff.”

“It will. Be patient. You do know about Pesewa’s famous mansion near Tantra Hill, don’t you?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Good. Only the four older wives lived there with him.”

“And the fifth?”

“He rented and furnished a place for her at Sakumono. He was in the process of constructing a house for her in her name at Taifa.”

“I call that special treatment,” Sylv commented, “A violation of the first cardinal rule of polygyny. Special treatment as wife goes with special treatment as widow, if you ask me. Where did you say she was hiding?”

“She didn’t disclose it to me, but she left me a telephone number, her sister’s. I am to pass my messages through her. And for the show this morning, how about scratching the surface of this whole saga with a brief mention of widowhood rites.”

“Is that the catch?”

“Yes. Slip it in. See why I couldn’t wait to tell you at the studio? You needed to know in order to digest it through the rest of the hours before the show. See?”

Sylv clucked his tongue. “You still haven’t said why she came to you, Muff. What did she want?”

“Protection.”

“Fantastic. You never told me about the police sign post in front of your flat!” Sylv insinuated.

“Ha! Ha! Cut out your sarcasm Sylv. Since when has the police become involved in a traditional practice not specifically banned by law like female genital mutilation. She came to me because she found out I was your producer. See? So you were the catalyst. You and the media are her best hope for protection. If Pesewa’s family realize they are being watched by no less an institution as the media, they will become more conscious of their actions. Moreover, there is something else.”

“What?”

“She is hoping that all this will compel her four older rivals to get tested.”

Sylv grunted.

“Sometimes you do really sound like your Let-them-say, you know. What is it?” Muff chided.

“It is this whole famous Pesewa oddity thing, Muff. No concubines, no chicken-soups. His much trumpeted faithfulness to his wives. Do you really buy it? Couldn’t he have contracted the disease from outside the marital home?”

“No.”

“You sound so dead sure.”

“Take it from me as I did from his 5th Wife. The five women who crossed Pesewa’s path in his lifetime and with whom he felt the desire to become intimate, he made them all his wives. Something about a soothsayer’s vision linking it with his continuous prosperity.”

“So was it a home thing?”

“It was.”

Sylv chuckled. “No wonder the 5th Wife is being suspected. Did she swear on her faithfulness to you? Is she looking forward

to the outcome of her test?”

“Who does?”

Sylv yawned loudly.

“Go catch some sleep.” Muff said, “And make sure your alarm clock is switched on. Make a light joke of your grogginess and croaky voice on the show. Your listeners will notice, believe me. Tell them the truth; that you were up for hours in the night about something to do with the show. They’ll forgive you if you tell them the truth.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Sure! I am your producer.”

They both laughed.

“One final thing, Muff.”

“What?”

“I want Dina and her team in.”

“MUTE?”

“Yes. This is too huge for Harvest FM alone. We do make a good team too, don’t we?”

MUTE was a Non-Governmental Organization that was committed to gathering and documenting fringe information about anything and everything, to build what they had termed: an Alternative Library. MUTE was not an acronym. The founder chose that name to reflect the silence of society, which translated into the absence of a documentation culture. The loss of information about us, and the distortions about us that come from elsewhere to tell us about us, all a result of our dependence on oral tradition. A practice no longer feasible. The old folks in the villages are dying with all the knowledge about us stored in their heads. They are unable to hand them down because the recipients, who are the young ones, have all left for the cities.

The founder of MUTE, Dina, a divorcee with no child, worked

with three other women namely, Kabria, who was married with three children; Vickie, who was still unmarried and Aggie, who was married with no child.

MUTE and Harvest FM had a record of many successful collaborations.

“I expected that!” Muff muttered.

Sylv chuckled. “See you.” And replaced his receiver.

Let-them-say barked furiously.

“It’s me sweetheart. It’s me!” Sylv drawled.

Let-them-say growled deeply. Sylv went and rubbed a hand through the fur on its back. “Poor you. All the noise and long talk. I am as much unsettled as you. We are in the twenty-first century and I am to go and expend energy moaning about widowhood rites. Great, eh?”

Let-them-say growled.

“Yes,” Sylv went on, patting the dog’s head, “It is the reality of our times. Our reality. See?”

Dina’s telephone buzzed into her thoughts at exactly 11.23 am. She was slumped behind her table at the office. It was Sylv Po.

“Did you listen to me earlier?” he blurted as soon as Dina uttered hello.

Dina brought home his discourtesy. “And a very good morning to you too Sylv.”

Sylv laughed. “Oh dear! Forgive my primitiveness, Dina. Blame it on overexcitement. A very good morning to you too. But back to my question. I slipped in a little something about widowhood rites. The studio is already flooded with calls. I was wondering if you could...”

“No!”

“Won’t you let me...?”

“No Sylv. We can’t. Not now. Our hands are full with our other cases. Kabria is on leave. It is just Vickie, Aggie and I – plus Aggie is dealing with some headaches of her own.”

“Same old problem?” Sylv asked.

“Same old problem.”

“Can you still hear me out before you make your final decision?” Sylv pressed.

“I doubt that it will make any difference, but if you insist...” Dina acceded.

“Thank you,” Sylv laughed, “So as I was asking, have you ever done anything on widowhood rites ? Any research or documented information?”

“A little. Something brief,” Dina revealed. “It’s on our list for detailed research work someday. But as I said, at the moment...”

“Where on your list?” Sylv cut in.

“Down. Way down. Every subject on our list for detailed research work is hot and vital. But as with everything else in life, one thing must come before another. We will work on it when...”

“This is real hot, Dina. Believe me,” Sylv interrupted again. “Can you push it up the list a little?”

“A little?” Dina asked skeptically. She knew Sylv too well.

“Okay. I lied. Not a little. Way up.”

“As in way up to the top of our long list?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Let’s say Harvest FM has vested interests. To be precise, Muff.”

“Has a sister of his been subjected to...?”

“No. She is not a sister. She was a mate of his at the Institute and happened to have been made wife number five by Pesewa

not too long before his death.” Sylv disclosed.

“*The Pesewa?*”

“The Pesewa,” Sylv declared.

He summarized the details of the saga to Dina. She was hooked before Sylv was completely done.

“Your wish is granted,” she told Sylv, “I guess we can re-prioritize and push it way up. In fact, we may be getting a helping hand...”

“From God above?” Sylv quipped.

“The Almighty One’s hand is always in it already,” Dina joked back. “No. This one is more down to earth. Of the human race. Like you and me. An undergraduate student with a great sense for dissertation topics.”

“Such as?”

“MUTE!”

“As in the organization with whose pretty boss I have the honor and pleasure to be holding this conversation?” Sylv burred.

Dina laughed heartily.

“This could all have been destined, you know,” Sylv added. “Is she coming to do a sort of attachment with you?”

“Yes. To gain first hand insight into the whole MUTE idea and the Alternative Library concept. I hope she doesn’t change her mind and not show up.”

“She won’t.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am desperate. We must get this done.”

“We will,” Dina declared, sounding hopeful, “It is destined. You said it yourself, remember?”

They both laughed and hung up.

Chapter Four

THE BLOND AFRO-WIGGED woman plagued Idan. The feeling that she was after him for something was nagging him. He knew her from nowhere, but did she know him from somewhere? As far as he was concerned, she had bumped into him or they had bumped into each other in the office corridor. She tried to get him interested in her. Love at first sight? Lust at first bump? What would make a woman stoop so low as to force herself on a man who obviously didn't want her and humiliate herself to that extent?

He sighed and checked the clock. It was time to leave. He rose, picked up his dark blue striped coat, cast one final look at the framed photograph of his wife on his table and sighed again, wondering what she was doing at that moment. Maybe heading home from her office job with MUTE.

He had never fully grasped what the concept of this non-governmental organization his wife worked for, was about. Information build-up. Alternative library. Documentation. What was that? Sometimes they went roaming around ghetto enclaves like Sodom and Gomorrah or pursued interests like how a mad woman by a lagoon became pregnant.

That was not his style of a job after all those years at the university. No wonder the organization was made up of only women. What man would waste his time doing that? Even if the salary were good, which it wasn't, it would eat into any man's esteem. Where he was concerned, MUTE was an organization

that went about poking its nose into other people's business. Aggie was always vehement in her disgust and disagreement with his perception. She loved her job with a passion that sometimes left him feeling jealous. She loved him. He knew that. And he loved her too. But a greater force out there somewhere always appeared to have a stronger bearing on their marriage and their lives. From way back when they were lovers on campus, he used to be the poor and needy one, and Aggie was the generous provider. She wasn't from a rich family. Her father and mother and stepmother still lived together in their hometown. Yet somehow, Aggie always had money. And she took good care of him. He never probed nor questioned the source of her finances. It had little to do with the respect of each other's independence and more to do with the hunch he had had then, that he might not like the answers to the questions he would ask.

A door banged shut. It had to be one of the security men checking on office lights left on.

Idan started. Why were these events of decades ago seeping into his thoughts now? Odd how one deliberation metamorphosed into another? Especially when it comprised questions one never fully sought adequate and satisfactory answers to. Such thoughts had a way of lying low, waiting in the subconscious.

He gave the office one final run over. The louvres were shut. The lights were all switched off. The ceiling fan was off. He slung his coat over one arm and picked up his briefcase with the other. He strode out of the office towards the car park. He should have been a contented man. Many envied him. He had a good job; a beautiful wife; a home to be proud of and only one huge void. It wasn't a pleasant feeling that the suspicion was gradually shifting onto him. Why was one's contentment never fully complete like a full moon?

He reached the car park, deactivated the alarm system of his excellently maintained black Volkswagen Passat and popped open the doorknobs by remote control. A dusty road under construction nearby had left its mark and covered the car in fine smooth red dust. Idan smiled gratefully at life, even in spite of the huge void. He opened the back door and flung his coat onto the seat. Then he shut it and opened the driver's door. He slid in behind the steering wheel and placed his briefcase on the front passenger floor. Aggie used to nag over that a lot, insisting the back seat was the safest place. Then people started getting their back windows smashed for access to their briefcases. They both eventually agreed that the boot was probably the safest place. Yet the bags and briefcases continued to find their way onto the seats and floors of the cars. Psychologists would have to look into that one.

He strapped on his seat belt, started the car and steered slowly toward the exit. He switched on the radio and pressed the second knob for his favorite FM station.

Bonchaka warbled. "Puulele...lelepuupu! Puulele...lele puupu!"

Idan hummed along. Poor Terry. So talented, so young, so dead, so gone!

He continued to hum, concentrating ahead. Then it happened, swift and sudden. And Idan was certain that all he did was blink, because he didn't take his eyes off the road one second. The pretty, well made up, svelte young female figure must have literally materialized from nowhere. Because one second she wasn't there and the next second she was there, flat on the parking ground beside his car, which meant one thing only: he had knocked her down. He jammed the brake, flung the door open and flew out of the car to her. She was already up when he got to her, and she was

picking up the stuff that had spilled out and ramming them back into her handbag.

“Oh God! Oh God! Lady! Are you hurt?” he wailed.

“I am sorry, Sir. I am so sorry!” she cried back. “Please forgive me. It was entirely my fault. I wasn’t looking, My God, I have caused you such inconvenience. Please forgive me.”

Idan was flabbergasted. He had just knocked her down and there she was rather apologizing and taking the blame. What graciousness.

Idan waited for her to pick up the last item from the ground and stuff it into her bag and held out his hand to help her up. She smelled so good.

Idan had to restrain himself from offering to assist as she brushed the dirt off herself. The opportunity came when he noticed that her handbag was getting in her way. He took it from her without asking. She let go of it without a protest.

“I am truly sorry for this!” she apologized again, and stretched out her hand for her handbag. She was almost as tall as he was, the three and a half inches of her shoe heels included.

“Why do you continue to apologize?” Idan reproached her, “It is I who should be apologizing. I was the one who knocked you down, though how I missed such a ... honestly, I didn’t see you. I must have blinked a second too long. What other reason could there have been for me missing out on such a ...”

She laughed infectiously. “You blinked a second too long? What is that?” she asked, still laughing.

Idan was bemused. “I just knocked you down and you are still able to find the energy for some humor? Someone else would have been screaming by now for the police and enquiring about the validity of my insurance!” he blurted.

She didn’t burst into laughter. The laughter burst out from

within her. A laughter so feathery and infectious that Idan found his eyes involuntarily transfixed upon her face. She rested a fleeting gaze into his eyes and looked away with a smile, so tiny and mysterious. Idan's whole mind focused on her lips. The feathery laughter and the mysterious smile. He chided himself to discard the growing thoughts. "Are you not hurt at all?" he managed at last.

"No. Really, I am all right. I am not hurt at all," she assured him.

Idan was lost for words. "Do you live around here?" he stuttered, feeling inexplicably foolish and inadequate.

Her poise and calmness and apparent unpreparedness to exploit the situation overwhelmed him. In today's money grabbing society, she was a true rarity. Extraterrestrial. And what a pretty ET she was.

She chuckled and purred, "It's only office buildings I see around. Do people live around here?"

Idan roared with laughter. She joined in, and together they laughed, their eyes locking into each other's, and while Idan drank in her attractiveness, she studied him.

"Are you sure you are not hurting at all?" Idan stopped laughing abruptly and asked anxiously.

Her lips parted slightly and stayed that way for a few seconds before she hesitated briefly and said, "Well...I think I got a tiny scratch here." And stretched out her right elbow to him.

It wasn't much of a scratch but still one that could easily turn nasty if unattended to.

"Look, let me rush you to a clinic for a quick dressing. It shouldn't take long. There's a clinic around here. I know a nice nurse there." Idan offered.

But she remained insistent on not going. "I really don't want to go!" she said feebly.

It tickled Idan's emotional nerve ends. Then to his horror, she started to walk away from him.

Overwhelmed and confused and uncertain of everything and nothing at the same time, he wanted to move the two strides to block her path but felt rooted to the spot as if the earth beneath his feet had turned to glue. Like a bad dream unfolding right before his eyes, he stood and stared in awe at her gradually receding back. The spell broke when he saw her stagger, obviously gripped by a sudden bout of dizziness. He gained back the sprint in his legs and dashed to her. He caught her by the arm just before her legs gave way. She sank into him. Her body, almost weightless, made a pillar of his.

"Young lady, you are coming with me!" he declared, "You are not well and I am not letting go of you even if you scream."

Some passers-by stopped to watch them.

"See?" he scolded gently, "If you don't get into my car for us to get out of here fast, we will soon be surrounded by a throng of spectators. Come!"

She didn't resist. "Maybe I am not feeling so good after all," she muttered with a chuckle and touched a hand to her forehead.

"It is not a maybe. You are definitely not feeling good," Idan chided and helped her into the car. He went round and got into his seat and started the car. He exited the car park slowly and drove towards the T-junction. He stopped to check the traffic on the main road. Then he regretted not having taken a different route or joined the main road earlier, because suddenly a shadow he dreaded, darkened his side window. His passenger screamed. Idan suffered an immediate attack of nausea. She had added on another ridiculous accessory to the blond Afro wig, a huge pair of sunglasses, very dark and perfectly round. The rage that instantly consumed Idan was so intense that he momentarily lost his voice.

The young pretty lady beside him in the car, sank deeper into her seat, seeking to disappear somehow, or be swallowed up whole in the softness of the cushions till the unfolding nightmare was over. She was shaking so badly that Idan felt like his ears were actually hearing the sound of the clattering of her bones. He sensed that the blond-wig-woman might cause a greater stir or even get in front of his car if he ignored her and attempted to join the main road. So he put the gear in reverse and found a convenient place to park. He remained in the car. He felt that if he got out, he would render her accessibility to him easier. He would also be leaving the frightened young lady inside the car alone and the blond wig woman might get in unexpectedly and attack her. So he kept the engine running and rolled down his side window.

She attacked immediately. "*Hoooo! Hoooo!*" she hooted, giving Idan no chance to ask her what she wanted. "Chicken soup man!" she roared on, "*Hoooo! Sugar daddy! So this was your reason for giving me the cold shoulder? This pathetically thin and sickly looking thing? Hoooo!*"

Idan was so shocked and appalled that he broke into a cold sweat. Then it crossed his mind to roll up the windows and step on the accelerator and zoom off. Instead, he left the engine running, rolled up the window, entreated the young lady passenger to stay put in her seat, and got out of the car. He quickly closed the door behind him, leaned against it and faced the wig woman. From inside the car the young lady observed the hot exchange of words between the man in whose car she was trapped and whose name she hadn't even asked; and the strange woman in the ridiculous wig and sunglasses looking like something from space. The brouhaha lasted some minutes. Then the woman resumed her hooting while clapping her hands wildly. Suddenly, when Idan least expected it, she stopped, swung round sharply,

and briskly strode off, throwing her arms and legs freely into the air as if she owned it.

Idan remained rooted to the spot till the strange woman disappeared. Then he got back into the car, looking as though he had seen a ghost and overwhelmed by an embarrassing sense of foolishness.

“Are you thinking what I think you are thinking?” he asked the young lady as soon as he sat down.

The young lady stared at him wide-eyed. Then probably seeing something in there, softened up and smiled. She said nothing.

“You did think what I thought you were thinking, didn’t you?” Idan quipped.

She burst into laughter. Idan joined in, then he said. “Unbelievable! But would you believe me if I tell you that the first time that I ever saw this woman was this morning?”

He started the car.

“I thought she was your wife!” the young lady remarked, fixing a stare at Idan’s ring finger.

Idan chuckled. “My wife has finer taste,” he stated.

The young lady’s stare diverted onto Idan’s face. It lingered there for a while. Idan returned her look briefly, caught her eye, and turned his attention back onto the road. It remained quiet inside the car well after Idan joined the main road. Then he broke the silence.

“I think she is a mental case.”

The young lady didn’t respond.

Idan battled with himself. If only she would say something. Anything. Because he began to struggle with the probability that her continued silence meant she didn’t believe him. It heightened his frustration.

“What is it with some of you women?” he shot out in despair.

“I don’t even know her name.”

The young lady smiled. She still didn’t say anything. Idan began to drum on the steering wheel with his fingertips. The young lady saw his irritation. She laughed slightly.

“I am also feeling uncomfortable,” she blurted.

“What?” Idan snapped sharply.

“Didn’t she see the ring on your finger?” she asked.

Idan wanted to shout. He was excited that she had spoken at last. “Not all females are discouraged by that!” he responded, “Actually, word has it that some women prefer men who have it on.”

“Oh please!” the young lady protested.

“It’s what I have heard,” Idan insisted.

She laughed. Idan observed her from the corner of his eye. She was an even more pretty sight when she laughed, he thought to himself, and made up so beautifully. Had he really knocked her down?

“Actually I have heard of that notion too,” the young lady barged into his thoughts.

“Which notion?” Idan feigned ignorance.

“The one about men with rings,” she replied.

“You have?” Idan asked.

“Yes.”

“And do you know why?”

She shrugged. “If a young female is not looking for a long-term affair, why not go in for one with the lowest risk of such an expectation?” she babbled.

“In other words?” he pushed.

“Is the motivation not obvious? The older man with a ring fits perfectly, doesn’t he? No expectations of a lasting relationship, from either side. She fulfils for him those sexual fantasies and desires

that probably appall his 'ringed' better half at home. In return for which he also provides her with the financial security she craves for: a win-win situation."

"For whom?"

"Both of them, and sometimes even beyond," she said.

Idan frowned.

"The boyfriends. Can't you see?" she cried, "the regular boyfriends of those young women. The guys they truly love and hope to be with in future. Sometimes they are in the know."

"Their boyfriends?"

"Yes. Some young women actually do it with the blessing and connivance of their boyfriends. After all, they also benefit from whatever goodies the girl squeezes out of the old man."

Idan coughed nervously. "Is it always all about money?" he spat.

"Not always," the young lady replied slowly. She accentuated each word.

Idan's grip tightened on the steering wheel.

"Sometimes it is for the sheer emotional security and upliftment," she added.

"You mean...?"

"Cuddling; the sugar daddies pamper their chicken-soups and spoil them, and who doesn't want to be pampered and spoiled? They don't only shower them with cash and presents, but with lots of attention too. Sex is a strong emotionally addictive enticement. The official wearer of his ring..."

"His wife?" Idan asked.

"Yes. She is probably there at home occupied daily with household chores and the children. Her new focus of attention. If on top of all this, she has a job of her own, then what energy would she be left with at the end of the day to dream and live

out any sexual fantasies?”

“So is that where the chicken soup comes in?”

“Yes. She is young, being taken care of, has no responsibilities. It translates into energy the wife lacks, which the husband desires and which the chicken soup has in abundance. The sugar daddy adds to that energy with the time and attention he showers on the chicken soup and by the pain and anguish he causes the wife with his lack of love and attention and empathy for her, further depleting whatever little reserve the wife may have had. And we all know about the power of sex to enslave, and when a younger woman’s sex enslaves an older man and gains absolute ownership of his emotions, it punches holes the size of valleys, into his rationale which consumes his conscience.”

Idan released another nervous cough. Why the hell was he so nervous? And why the hell was she talking like that and sounding so philosophical? They hardly knew each other. Hell!

He slowed down as he approached a traffic light.

“Am I making you more uncomfortable?” she shot out unexpectedly.

It caught Idan off guard. “Oh no!” he retorted too readily and betrayed exactly what he was seeking to conceal.

She laughed, a laughter so hearty.

Idan rested a look upon her face. Gosh! The laughter. It was like something that had been hidden for decades which popped up for a precious moment inside his car. He studied her lips. Gosh!

The young lady’s eyes met his. “Of course, I am making you nervous!” she said. Then giggled.

Idan smiled brightly. “Today has been one hell of a crazy day!” he remarked.

“Mark the date!” the young lady advised.

“I have,” Idan informed her.

Her gaze was upon him. Their eyes met and locked. The spell was broken by the furious hooting of the horn by the driver directly behind them. The light had turned green a while ago and Idan hadn't even noticed. He sped off, ignoring the insults of the angry driver. His mind wandered back to the woman with the blond Afro wig.

"Did you see her around when I knocked you down?" he asked the young lady.

She shook her head.

"Could she have been stalking me?" Idan wondered.

"Maybe," the young lady agreed.

Idan laughed.

The young lady frowned.

"See how tilted our society is?" Idan declared to her.

The young lady's frown deepened.

"Had it been me stalking her, the police would have been on my heels by now." Idan remarked.

She chuckled. "So why don't you put the police on her heels too?" she suggested.

Idan sneered. "You really expect me to go to the police and report that a woman in a crazy wig was stalking me? I may end up being declared mentally deficient. Did I...? What did you say your name was again?"

The young lady laughed. "I don't recall having mentioned it at all," she stated.

Idan pretended to be surprised by it. "No?"

She laughed. "You didn't ask me. Nor where I was going."

Idan slowed down instantly and hit his forehead with his left palm. Not only had he unconsciously taken the route he normally took after work, but had also forgotten completely about his suggestion to get her to the clinic for a quick check-up. "Silly

me!” he said wryly.

“You are not completely off course,” she said.

“I wanted to take you to the clinic!” he wailed.

“Did I agree to that?” she sounded bemused.

“You didn’t?”

“No.”

“Did you have to?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Okay, you win. So now what?”

“Drop me at the roundabout. I’ll continue with a taxi to the campus,” she suggested.

“No!”

“No, what?”

“Do you really expect me to oblige and let you out at the roundabout?” Idan intoned.

The young lady turned her head slowly to Idan. “Do you know something? You didn’t really knock me down.”

Idan chuckled as one would to a joke.

“I mean it,” she persisted, “Your car only scraped my dress.”

“Which still got you down in the middle of the road. So driving you all the way to campus shouldn’t be too great a price for me to pay,” Idan decreed, “And since it’s getting dark, I’ll escort you right to your door.”

“No!” she snapped.

Idan frowned.

“Kind offer, but please no,” she went on, “People talk, you know...?” And wagged her ring finger in the air.

Idan smiled and said nothing. The traffic light ahead was green. Idan slowed deliberately till it turned red. He stopped. The driver behind him yelled obscenities. Idan heard none of it. He faced the young lady inside the car. The air inside the car recharged.

“You still haven’t told me your name,” he reminded her.

“Randa,” she said coyly.

Idan turned the name over several times inside his head and rolled it on the tip of his tongue like a beautiful song. “Randa... Randa.” And smiled.

She smiled back at him.

No words were spoken further.

Idan took off on green and gracefully endured the final batch of obscenities from the provoked driver behind. He didn’t drop her at the roundabout. She compromised on his insistence and agreed to his demand that she should at least allow him to drop her at the campus taxi station. She thanked him when they got there and reached for the door handle. He stopped her and reached for his coat from the back seat. He plunged his hand into the inner pocket and brought out his wallet. He flipped it open and pulled out a complimentary card. He handed it to her. She took it and studied it briefly. Then she brought out her purse from her bag, put the card in and replaced the purse inside her bag.

“My greatest pleasure meeting you, Idan,” and offered him her hand.

“The greatest pleasure is mine, Randa,” he mimicked.

She chortled and took hold of the handle.

“Let me give you something for the taxi fare to campus at least, please!” Idan pleaded.

She shook her head. “Don’t be silly,” she laughed, “I have money on me. How do you suppose I was going to make it to campus from where we crashed?”

She opened the door, got out, closed it gently and said to him, “Go!”

Idan made no attempt to start the car.

She turned and strode away without another word.

Idan remained in the car and watched her back till she hailed a taxi and disappeared inside. Then he called his wife on his mobile phone and told her he was on his way home.

Aggie asked to know what happened.

The lie shot out of his mouth before he could stop it. "A last minute meeting at the office. I misplaced the paper with the agenda to be discussed. It delayed everything."

Aggie became anxious. "So did you find it?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!" she breathed.

The lie he had told, haunted Idan the entire drive home. Why did he lie so spontaneously to his wife? He didn't need to. He could have told her what exactly happened. So why did he lie?

He had still not found an answer to his question by the time he reached home.

Chapter Five

THE PLAIN-CLOTHES security guard detailed by Muff to keep watch outside the main gate of Harvest FM, was a regular, unbiased and liberal minded guy. But something didn't quite fit as he spots this coconut seller pushing his wares around in a wheelbarrow and sporting that kind of mobile phone. One of those first generation ones that were the size of cement blocks and weighed a ton, would not have caught the guard's attention and made him suspicious. He knew of some people who gave theirs away free of charge to acquire new ones, and the coconut seller could have gotten lucky and received one such cement block mobile phone. But if selling coconuts was his only true job, then the mobile phone he was using was out of place. He appeared able to afford lots of units too, because he was on the phone almost all the time and showed little interest in attracting customers to his coconuts.

Something else caught the guard's attention. The coconut seller continually made eye contact with another man who coincidentally was also selling from a wheelbarrow, only his wares were sugarcane. He too had a similar mobile phone. No one seemed interested in them. Everyone was there for the one special reason. But for the fact that he had been detailed to look out for anything suspicious, the two wheelbarrow sellers would not have attracted his attention either.

The guard moved closer to the coconut seller, bought some pieces of fried bean cakes from a girl of about twelve, who was

selling them in a sieve container, took one, bit into it and remained in the same spot. To an onlooker, the guard was just one of many anxious spectators who had gathered under the trees in front of Harvest FM, hoping to catch a glimpse of the late Pesewa's 5th Wife, who was due to appear live on Sylv Po's GMG show.

The guard bit into the bean cake again and fixed an eye in the direction everyone else was looking, while his ears strained toward the coconut seller as he made another call. The guard's eye roved and settled on the sugarcane seller. He too was on his mobile phone. The guard picked up the words of the coconut seller.

"What if she doesn't show up...mourning clothes, yes? By all means she will be in mourning clothes...you too...and don't miss it! The make of the car and the number plate...no...feed it directly to the driver. I will also feed him with her appearance...that is not part of our job. The trailing is all up to the driver...yes...!"

The dark red Opel Corsa saloon car carrying the Catholic nun in an all white habit and a priest, also in a white cassock, arrived at Harvest FM's front gate at about 6.20am. The two had earlier turned down Harvest FM's offer to let one of the studio cars pick them up at the designated point of their choice. The large intervals in the iron rod fencing of Harvest FM rendered the observation of happenings in the front yard easy. The nun and the priest got out of the car and were hurriedly led into the huge beige building.

"...the nun and the priest...or maybe to pray for her...oh yes. She will need it..."

Minutes later, the priest alone emerged from the reception through its opaque glass doors back into the front yard and got into the car. It sped out almost immediately back through the gates. The priest apparently had only accompanied the nun to the radio station.

“...what I think? The priest is gone. No other woman in mourning clothes has arrived yet... and check your time...any-time soon...of course...who else...Holy! Holy! Holy...Yes...did us all in. Who would have thought...the driver...yes...when her priest comes to pick her up.”

Muff strode briskly into the reception to receive the nun. From outside the gate, the outline of her back could be made out. What did Harvest FM want with a nun?

Muff led her away to an inner office where Sylv was already waiting with two other women. The older one was introduced to the nun as Dina, from MUTE. The younger one, who appeared to be just over twenty, was said to be a student at the university and at present on attachment to MUTE. She was intending to work for the organization for her dissertation in her final year. Her name was given as Destine. She hadn't been with MUTE for long, but Dina thought it appropriate to bring her along because Destine would become actively involved in the research on the issue to be discussed on the show.

“Is the taxi ready and waiting in the backyard?” Sylv asked Muff.

Muff nodded. “All set and waiting.”

“Shouldn't you be in the studio by now?” Dina wondered.

Muff laughed. “The show doesn't own us. When need be, we make adjustments to suit us.”

“Don't mind his long talk!” Sylv came in, “I have been in there already. They are running some adverts and announcements now. We have a bit of time.”

The nun beckoned Muff nearer and asked if she could change right away. Muff agreed and pointed to a brown door on the right. The nun nodded politely to the others and headed for the

room. As soon as the brown door closed behind her, Dina hissed to Muff, "How should we address her?"

"For now and throughout the programme, we have mutually agreed to address her as simply 5th Wife."

Dina was astounded. "She agreed to that?"

"It was her idea to begin with!" Muff disclosed.

The brown door opened just then and out emerged a sporty looking woman in a dark blue and white jogging outfit with matching sneakers and a cap."

"Is the habit the right size for me?" Muff joked.

5th Wife smiled. With the veil and loose dress gone, she was as Muff remembered her at school. Dark smooth skin; big brown eyes; a neck fully ringed like an 'akuaba doll'. A true Ghanaian beauty. These details had escaped him that night she came to him dressed as a woman of the night. She was more visible now. She had added weight around the hips, which had further enhanced her hour-glass figure. But she was a woman in hiding and was under a lot of stress. So her face lacked vibrancy.

The guard from outside called Muff on his mobile phone to inform him of an increase in the number of people at the front gate. Word had apparently gone round that the nun, who arrived with a priest, was actually the 5th Wife. Sylv revealed that the renowned social scientist, Ms Kamame, who was originally scheduled to appear together with Dina and 5th Wife, had had to cancel her appearance due to an unexpected development.

Destine expressed her gratitude to Dina for inviting her along; and to Sylv and Muff, her appreciation for being accepted onto the panel. Then to 5th Wife, she said, "I feel your pain Madam, especially because of the manner of your husband's death. My father is dead too. He also took his own life."

The revelation was unexpected and it numbed them all. No

one spoke. Then as if to repair the damage she had just caused, Destine added hastily, “I just wanted you all to know.”

From the moment of that early dawn call from Muff to Sylv, to when the arrangements to have 5th Wife on the GMG show became finalized, almost one month had passed. And during each daily show five times a week of this period, Sylv had reminded listeners of the impending interview. This had whetted the appetite of his listeners and hyped interest in the whole saga. Everyone loved good gossip. It also proved good for business. The station’s Adverts Manager was bombarded with calls. With the anticipated record listeners expected to tune in to listen to the GMG show that morning featuring 5th Wife, every company with a product to sell, wanted its advert to run during the show. It was an opportunity to reach out to a potentially wide customer base.

Sylv made it known at the start of the programme that Harvest FM had made efforts to get someone from 5th Wife’s in-laws side to join in by phone to also present their side of the story. They had all declined. They demanded that if someone had to represent them on the programme, the person would have to be there in person. Harvest FM could not allow that since it would have jeopardized 5th Wife’s safety. Later, when they realized that Harvest FM was not going to give in to their demand, a man claiming to be a lawyer for the family, called and threatened to send Harvest FM to court if it proceeded with the programme. The programme was nevertheless going ahead because at that moment that they were seated in the studio, the station had received no court injunction.

Then Sylv introduced his guests and put the first question to 5th Wife.

“Let’s establish the essence of your presence here this morning, Madam. Are you in hiding?”

“Yes.” 5th Wife responded.

“Is your life in danger?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to tell us about it?”

“Certainly. Your very reference to me as the ‘5th Wife’, infers that my husband had four other wives before me. All the four had children with him. I didn’t. I am also relatively young and in my child bearing age. The family view the combination as legitimate grounds to compel me into a custom I completely disagree with.”

“Which is?”

“To marry me off to my late husband’s brother.”

Uproar broke out among the crowd outside the front gate who were gathered in groups around radios of all shapes and sizes.

“But this is common practice!” a man with buck teeth remarked.

“Common practice for whom?” a woman with a face roasted from over-bleaching retorted.

“Shshsh... Sylv is back!” another railed.

“Do you know him well enough to become his wife? This brother of your late husband?” Sylv asked 5th Wife.

5th Wife chuckled. “It doesn’t just take knowing someone well enough to become the person’s wife, does it?”

“What do you mean by that?” Sylv asked even though he knew what exactly 5th Wife meant.

“I don’t love him!”

The crowd outside burst into laughter.

“Does she want us to believe that she loved her late old husband? Ah! What does she take us for?” a man sporting a haircut popularly called ‘Torpedo’ chided.

“Is he younger or older than your late husband?” Sylv asked.

“Younger.”

“Yet you loved your late husband who was about twice your age?”

5th Wife sighed. “I know it sounds unbelievable to many, but I did. It wasn’t due to any strong body chemistry or his electrifying touches. It had nothing to do with compatibility in bed or any extraordinary sexual fulfillment. I needed emotional security and he offered it in abundance, with the added advantage of financial security too. He treated me like a queen.”

Destine cringed.

Sylv said, “5th Wife, why do you think your in-laws want to do that to you? As punishment?”

5th Wife weighed the question carefully. “It is an accepted custom in some societies, so customarily, it may be legitimate in certain situations. But the intention of my in-laws is dishonest. They want to misuse a customary practice of some cultures for a vengeful purpose. So had my conscience even accepted such a practice, which it doesn’t, I would still have probably gone into hiding to escape it.”

Sylv turned to Dina. “Can I call you by your name or would you prefer BOM?”

“What?” Dina shrieked.

“Boss of MUTE.”

Occupants of both the studio and the crowd outside roared with laughter.

In between her laughter, Dina said, “Dina will do.”

“All right, Dina. Are you familiar with this custom?”

Dina laughed. “I haven’t had the misfortune of being pushed into one. But yes, I know about it. And I must recommend Destine for the fast intensive research work she did on the subject to

further enrich our knowledge about it.”

Destine acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

Dina went on. “The custom is referred to as *levirate marriage*.”

“I am hearing of it for the first time,” Sylv conceded.

“Many probably are,” Dina remarked.

Sylv leaned back slightly. “Did any of you find out why our forefathers instituted such a practice?”

Dina chuckled. “You mean did any of us pour libation unto the forefathers to seek their response to this nagging question?”

Laughter.

“No, Dina. I am serious. I mean, customs are traditional activities, right?”

“Right.”

“And traditions are practices instituted and handed down from generation to generation, right?”

“Right.”

“But as the saying goes, there is a first time for everything. This means that any custom that we practise today, was instituted and practised for the first time at a point in time. It is that first time of institution and practice I am interested in. Let’s dare and delve into the thinking of our forefathers then. Why did they choose to institute such a practice?”

Dina sighed. “Let me try and tackle it from the basics. I think that it stems from our premise of the very foundation of marriage. I will not cite education as the main cause of its gradual erosion. 5th Wife here is very educated. I know of other highly educated women who have willingly gone into polygynous marriages. Urbanization and globalization have contributed to the steady erosion of the traditional concept of marriage in our societies. But significantly, it has remained a union not just between the man

and the woman entering into the union, but the two lineages to which they belong respectively. So a woman taken on as a wife by a man, becomes a wife or one of many wives of the lineage to which the husband belongs. That does not imply that she can be shared and tossed about between the men of the lineage. Her husband is her caretaker for the lineage. And with him, she carries out the marital obligation of procreation. The children produced from the union, belong to the lineage. The physical death of her caretaker, who was her husband, does not sever her marital union with the lineage. His physical absence in the world, only calls for his replacement by another of the lineage.”

“So, customarily, 5th Wife’s in-laws have broken no law?”

“If it is the custom of their lineage, then no!”

“Nonsense!” roasted face blurted angrily, “Ah! This woman inside, what is wrong with her? Isn’t she supposed to be educated?”

“What has that to do with her analysis?” torpedo haircut snapped.

“What?” roasted face frowned suspiciously. The word analysis sounded like an insult.

“A-n-a-l-y-s-i-s! That is what she is doing!” torpedo haircut repeated.

“You too analysis...analisa...analysis...anali everything! Nonsense! Why? Do you want to insult me?”

“Woman! If the bleaching soaps you used has affected your brain...”

“It’s all right!” buck teeth intervened. “We are missing the discussion.”

“Why aren’t they marrying off all of you? Why only you?” Sylv asked 5th Wife.

“I stated their grounds earlier. I am still young enough to

produce; and I bore him no child. So they are demanding that I fulfil that obligation...”

“With your late husband’s brother?”

“Yes.”

Sylv pondered over his next question. It was provocative but needed to be asked. “Do you see a legitimate demand in the customary sense? Considering that you two didn’t marry in church? You married under a customary law whose rules are being applied. What do you say to that?”

5th Wife maintained her composure. “If producing children for the lineage is their major reason for wanting me to marry my late husband’s brother, then the truth had better come out so we stop wasting each other’s time,” she declared.

‘The truth?’ Sylv breathed.

“Adweaaaaa.... eduro no akye no,” a shirtless young guy in a dirty pair of brown knickerbockers spat outside the gate, “Now she wants to speak the truth? So was it all lies she talked till now? Young woman who no want marry her size. Go marry some old man with plenty money who die down there. Now his ghost worries her to talk the truth? Ah! Women! They are bad. All of them bad.”

5th Wife sighed. “In my younger days, I had an abortion,” she began, “a crude one. I suffered a severe hemorrhage. I was operated on. I don’t know the medical details. What I know is that I suffered permanent damage to my tubes and womb. In short, I cannot conceive a child.”

“I’m sorry,” Sylv muttered.

Destine remained stone-faced.

Dina smiled awkwardly. Her own story had just been retold.

“Oyiwa! Ena eda ho no!” brown knickerbockers jubilated outside. He felt vindicated. In his world, women were evil. Period.

5th Wife went on. “I mentioned emotional security as being one of my reasons for marrying my late husband. That was it. It alleviated the misery of unfulfilled expectancy with a younger man looking forward to having children.”

“Did your husband know of your condition?” Sylv asked.

“Yes.”

“May I come in?” Dina sought to contribute.

Sylv gave her the go ahead.

“I completely identify with 5th Wife,” she proceeded, “Had I known before hand that I was barren, I would have spared myself the years of misery and anxiety I contended with while I was married to my ex-husband. I don’t wish for any woman to ever go that way. It was emotional suicide. To know you cannot conceive a child is bad enough. When you don’t know you cannot conceive a child and believing you can, you go through heaven and hell trying to, under the intense watchful eyes of your husband and his family and your family, all to no avail; you live your whole life, daily dreading the sign, any little sign, which pointed to an oncoming menstruation. The waiting, the hoping, that no drop of blood would show its head. And then it does and continues to, month after month. It leaves you in emotional tatters.”

Sylv begged to digress a little and observed how women in some parts of the world had both the societal and emotional right to decide against having children.

“We don’t,” Dina, expounded, “If a woman in our society has no child, it is most likely because she cannot conceive a child. Not because she doesn’t want to. A woman’s failure to procreate in our society is seen as a tragic failure on her part to partake of

life's cycle at its very basic level, and is perceived as unnatural and unwomanly."

Sylv agreed, "Ms Kamame once pointed out on this show that unmarried daughters and nieces, were encouraged and pushed into seeking a responsible man to make a child or two with, and that this was common practice and cut across tribal and social and educational levels," he stated.

5th Wife nodded vigorously.

Dina said, "If nothing at all, the notion is that it proves her to be a complete woman. Physically, socially, spiritually and emotionally, procreation is considered to be a woman's obligation to the ultimate essence of life itself." Dina concluded.

"Well said," Sylv cheered, "But back to you 5th Wife..."

"May I ask a question?" Destine, who had been tensely quiet all this while, interrupted.

Dina frowned. It hadn't been expected of Destine to pose her own questions to anyone. She wasn't there on her own accord. Whatever Dina said, reflected the standpoint of MUTE. But listeners had heard a voice ask to pose a question and were waiting. So Dina cleared her frown to signal no opposition. She didn't even know to whom Destine wanted to ask the question, but guessed it to be 5th Wife. And if Destine was good enough to be entrusted with doing the research work on widow inheritance why deny her a question or two that might help her with her final year thesis.

"5th Wife," Destine began, "My interest lies in another angle of your marriage to your late husband."

Dina twitched. She had no idea why.

Destine went on. "You made an interesting observation earlier that you married your late husband for, among other things, your emotional security."

“Yes I did.”

“Did you consider the emotional insecurity that your pursuit of emotional security probably created in his older wives?”

Sylv cut in quickly and said, “You don’t have to answer that, 5th Wife.”

“Oh but I do!” 5th Wife responded.

Dina rested a look to kill on Destine’s face. But Destine, apparently suspecting that would happen, kept her eyes rigidly away from Dina’s. She glued them unto 5th Wife’s face.

“All his four older wives?” 5th Wife posed to Destine and went on without waiting for a response, “Same as his fourth wife considered when she joined the oldest three. And as his third wife considered when she joined the first two. And as his second wife considered when she turned a monogamous marriage into a polygynous one by her consent.”

Destine fidgeted.

Dina’s face remained bland.

Sylv passed a hurried comment about women being their own worst enemies.

5th Wife remained calm and composed.

Sylv checked his time and reverted quickly to the purpose of the show. “5th Wife, would you want us to touch on your husband’s death? Ghanaians were made to believe that he died of heart failure in his sleep. You have caused a great stir with your insistence that he committed suicide with a concoction of drugs. Why do you think he took his own life? And why are you not towing the family line to keep this from the public?”

“The right thing must be done,” 5th Wife responded, “if this one truth is covered up, other truths linked to this one truth will also end up getting covered up, and accusing fingers will end up being pointed at innocent people. The night prior to his death,

when he came to me, he said a lot of strange things. He continually referred to hastening an inevitable death and an honorable departure from the world. He was afraid of a slow mental decline and the gradual wasting away of his body. He had tested positive for HIV. My oldest sister-in-law knew it. The very fear of the disease itself was what drove my husband into what he did. Who knows? Maybe he was even encouraged into the act as being a better option to having his positive status found out.”

“Are you saying...?”

“I am saying nothing. I said, who knows? Maybe. We add to the stigmatization if we cover up that he had the virus. And that it was our attitude to the disease that compelled him to choose, what to him, was the lesser of two evils. It wasn’t the disease that killed him. It was the fear and stigmatization of it. My personal nightmare is that my husband went to his death believing that it was I who infected him. I have done one test already...”

“And the result?” Sylv cut in.

“Negative. But one test is not conclusive enough, so I’ll repeat it.”

Sylv studied 5th Wife. “Did you and your husband have a sexual relationship?” he asked her.

“Yes. We did. But I had my way with him in a manner that I suspect my older rivals probably didn’t and wouldn’t dare.”

“Condoms?”

“Yes. I always insisted. It was a basic principle for me as one of several wives. When he refused its use, I wore mine.”

“What we call female condom?”

“Yes.”

An angry male voice rose from among the crowd outside, “Yeeeeh! See? See the women of Ghana today? Listen to what she is saying.

And with no shame at all. I tell you, all the *wahala* in the world today, is because women have ceased to be women. They want to be both men and women. You want to have your marital right with her, and she goes ordering you to wear a condom. For that alone, I refuse many times. The very fact that it was her who ordered me to wear it.”

“*Kwasea!*” roasted face muttered to herself, not daring to let the angry voice hear her. “*Tsk.*”

“Ah! What is the world coming to? Did you hear her? If the man refused to wear a condom, she wore one. Ei! This is all the fault of those too known white women in Europe and America. All they need are a few crazy educated Ghanaian women who think more white than black in their black skins. But I don’t blame them. It’s the white people. They started it all. They made the condoms for us, made the power we had over whether to wear it or not, get into our heads; then boom, dropped another for the women too. Just to undermine our power. So now if we refuse to wear it, our women just excuse themselves into the bathroom. And if you think that she went in there to urinate, think again. By the time she returns to bed, she has it in place. Ei! What is the world coming to?”

“So you always used protection. Your first test was negative. Yet your husband died believing you infected him. And your in-laws appear to think the same too?”

“Yes. And therein comes my suspicion of the sincerity of the custom to marry me off to my late husband’s brother,” 5th Wife responded. “If my in laws suspect me of being HIV positive and having been unfaithful to my late husband, why are they so eager to marry me off to another family son?”

“That is a question we shall leave hanging, listeners!” Sylv

declared. Then he checked his time and signaled Muff who went for the adverts button. Like the last question, the programme was also left hanging, with no tentative announcement as to whether it was over or would resume.

The crowd outside waited eagerly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the 5th Wife in a nun's habit.

Muff left the studio with the three women. Dina and Destine were ushered back into the office they had occupied previously. A security guard came and escorted 5th Wife out into the backyard. Muff disappeared behind the brown door, where 5th Wife had earlier traded the habit for the jogging outfit. He re-appeared minutes later to an astounded Dina and Destine who didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He headed to the reception dressed as a nun.

Outside the gate, the crowd thickened.

Suddenly someone shrieked, "There she is!" and pointed at the figure of a nun whose back was turned to them.

The nun came to stand briefly on the porch outside the reception and went back inside.

"Where is she? I want to see her. Please give me way. I am too short. I can't see from here. Please!" someone cried.

"There! Can't you see her with her back turned? Are your eyes also short?" another retorted.

"*Aaaah!* Look at her. I can see her. Ah! But as for this, now that everybody knows that she came dressed as a nun, her in-laws always can easily catch her, no?" the short man opined.

A Fan-ice-cream man on his bicycle who was full of smiles for the good business he had made even at that time, selling ice-cream and yogurt, sniped, "The woman ah, she is too known. Ah! She should have remained quiet at wherever she was hiding."

“Me, to tell you the truth, I don’t see her problem at all,” a bald-headed man came in, “she married a man. He died. The family has given her another husband from the family. She says she doesn’t like him. If she doesn’t like him, why doesn’t she just shut up? What is all this plenty yabi...yabi...all over? Me, I hope they catch her.”

“*Ebei!* My brother!” a woman with some pieces of Fanti kenkey in a tray on her head shot in, “If I was your wife and I died and my family insisted they wanted you to marry my sister, will you be happy?”

“*Maame,*” baldhead rejoined, “What are you saying? Ask me that question again. This time, qualify the sister of my dead wife being offered to me. If it is my sister’s older sister, Araba Pompo, I will cry unto God to strike me dead immediately. That woman is so ugly that people advise their little children not to look at her face at night, lest they have very bad dreams. But should it be my wife’s little sister, Sweetie Pie, yeeeh! How will I not be thankful? I will thank them and thank God and thank them over and over again till someone begs me to stop thanking them. Sweetie Pie for wife? *Chiaa!* That will be one lucky day.”

“Foolish man!” one woman yelled.

“That is why he has no hair on his head. I am sure it went together with his brains.” Another supported.

Everyone was so engrossed in the discussions and arguments and the nun in the reception whose back was still turned to them that, no notice was given to the taxi that emerged from behind Harvest FM onto the untarred road to join the main tarred road. In the back seat, was the lone figure in the dark blue and white jogging suit and cap.

Meanwhile, Muff, sweating in the habit, began to feel tiredness in his legs, having remained in one spot for so long.

“When will this nightmare end, Sylv?” he snarled.

Sylv’s sides were bloated with suppressed laughter. “Just remain on display for a few more minutes, Muff.”

The plain-clothes guard outside the gate couldn’t help it. He laughed out loud at the sight of Muff in the nun’s habit. Then he strained his ears towards the coconut seller who was back on the phone with the sugar cane seller.

“...yes...did us in...yeah...again...oh...and such a cheap trick. How could we have missed it?

Dina and Destine emerged from the reception to the car park. The guard noticed the coconut seller’s face light up as he hastily punched the sugarcane seller’s number.

“...Oh, it’s that woman with that organization. It’s the younger one I am interested in...I know...I know...but that could also be a trick. She may not be with the organization. They have pulled one on us already. Let’s not let go of this one...yes! We’ll trail her.”

Muff literally ripped the habit off himself when after being relieved of his duty, as Sylv chose to put it; he made it to the room with the brown door.

“Gosh!” He hissed. “Did our good Lord take into consideration the various weather conditions He Himself created for the world, when this dress code for His brides the world over, was created?”

The laughter that ensued was interrupted by one of the station’s security men stationed at the gate, who came to inform Sylv that, while the programme was in session, someone came looking for him.

“A relative?” Sylv asked.

“No, Sir. A prophet.”

“A prophet?” Muff exclaimed, “Congratulations Sylv. You must have made it on the front page of today’s heavenly newspaper.”

“Yeah!” Sylv sneered, “Following my bout with my pseudo nun and priest.” He asked the security guard if the prophet left a message.

“Yes, Sir. He said to tell you that he would be back,” the guard replied.

“Holy Moses!” Muff giped, “That sounds like Jesus.”

“Just that?” Sylv asked the guard.

“Just that, Sir,” the guard replied.

“Did he leave his name?” Sylv inquired.

“He did, Sir. Abednego. He said to tell you he was Prophet Abednego.”

Chapter Six

AGGIE SLUMPED DOWN on the low stool under the shady palm tree in the middle of the compound of their home, to begin her regular Saturday morning washing. She was tense. The waiting was killing her. The expectation of it, knowing it would happen anytime soon, was devastating. For the past few weeks, it had been happening every Saturday morning. Idan seemed unaware that she had noticed it. He was sitting in the living room, also agonizing no doubt, and waiting. The waiting that was killing both of them.

The clock struck ten. Aggie felt the first contraction of her muscle. The cramps always set in when the expectation soared. For Idan, it was always a mad race of the pulse.

Then the telephone buzzed.

It had happened. For Idan, the end of the waiting madness. For Aggie, tighter cramps and the first bout of the excruciating pain inside her chest. As if the nerve ends of her heart wanted to break free. She listened to the buzzing pattern she had come to know so well. Idan was beside the telephone. He didn't pick up the receiver. He never did. Aggie knew that pattern too.

The waiting continued. She could feel his anxiety, but she knew he couldn't feel her pain. Because he didn't know it existed.

One minute elapsed.

The telephone buzzed again. The second double ring of command.

Idan rose like a zombie from the armchair. Aggie's upper body jerked. She knew the ritual. She watched him.

He strode to the bedroom for his mobile phone. Leaving it there was also part of the ritual. She was yet to figure out why he did that. Why he always left his mobile phone in the bedroom when waiting for the two signature buzzes on the landline. Maybe because the bedroom was safer, being the furthest away from her, as she washed under the tree. All crafted to look normal, that he went for his mobile phone in the bedroom and remained in there to make a call. Because if the mobile phone was beside him in the living room, where the landline was, and upon the signal, he proceeded to the bedroom to make the call, it would look suspicious.

He punched the numbers.

Aggie held up the item she was about to wash next. His pants. She grimaced. Why was the world so full of pain? What was his lover on about? She must want Idan's wife to know she existed in her husband's life. The same way that a mistress taken on a secret trip would slip a G-string into the man's suitcase after his final packing, knowing very well that wife was the one most likely to do the unpacking at home, when hubby returned from his very tiring business trip. The games; the pains; the pleasures.

Idan was engrossed in his telephone conversation when Aggie rose from behind her washing and headed for the bedroom, striding on hot air. This act of infidelity, taking place in their matrimonial bedroom, adulterating its sanctity, was bizarre. She stood by the door. Idan's back was turned to her. His shoulders were drooped, submitting to his lover at the other end of the line. Aggie remained still. Then Idan spoke out the name. His lover's name.

"Randa...Randa...Randa."

Something strange happened that very instant. The pain left Aggie's chest and dragged with it the violent displeasure over

what she just observed, so that she managed to regain the use of her limbs and walk away back to her washing. Then when she sat back down on the low stool, she thought of a gunshot and oddly, it felt funny. The thought of a bullet thrusting into a body and ripping the insides apart. The immediate impact; momentary deadness; then the maddening pain.

She plunged her hand back into the soapy water and brought out the first item she got hold of. Fate could be cruel, for yet again, in her hands, were Idan's underpants. She wondered. Had he ever worn that and removed it to make love to Randa and put it back on and brought it back home with the scent of their lovemaking, for her to wash?

Idan emerged from the room just then and came to stand on the veranda. He wasn't holding his mobile phone but his face glowed. He was obviously contented and elated.

The pain swiftly returned inside Aggie's chest. That must be how a gunshot felt, because it was with such gusto that it almost knocked her off the stool.

Her blood froze and boiled at the same time. She began to tremble, at first mildly, then violently.

She had to confront him. "Idan!" she called.

Her voice sounded dangerously low and calm. It surprised and scared her because that wasn't her. She didn't sound like herself.

Idan turned. And as soon as he did, he knew. He saw it: that she knew. He didn't respond to her call. He just stood there, cool and dispassionate and waited.

"Who is Randa?" Aggie asked.

She sounded like a mother soothing a child.

Idan felt both relieved and sad. He loved his wife, yet Randa had overpowered him. The circumstances of their meeting and the events thereafter, endeared her to him. Randa did the rest, till

she came to possess and occupy and ceaselessly haunt his mind. She became his proverbial *Santrofi* bird. Captured by him in the forest, he was neither able to bring her home nor abandon her in the forest.

He didn't answer Aggie's question. How could he tell her, that Randa burst into his life from nowhere one evening after close of work in the office parking lot? How could he explain how Randa, now in control, held his emotional rudder? How it was Randa who now dictated the ups and downs of what he felt and how?

He gazed helplessly at his wife. Now that she knew, why pretend? He wanted to beg her to endure and allow him to live through Randa till he was back in control of himself and strong enough to completely submit to his wife again. He wanted to tell Aggie that he still loved her very much and was confused about how he could still love her so and still want Randa too. Then he realized rather wisely that, one wrong word from his lips and irreparable damage could be done. So he turned back into the room, took a quick shower, got into fresh clothes, came out and neither glancing at nor uttering a word to his wife, got into his car and drove out of the house.

Randa had called. And when Randa called, Idan went running.

She had implanted herself and taken hold of his whole being from the moment of their first encounter. Every minute of every hour of every day after that, he found himself drifting in contemplation of her. He yearned to see her again and felt terrible about it because she was young enough to be his daughter.

When they had parted after that first evening he knocked her down, all he knew about her was her name and that she was a student at the university. On two separate occasions he drove all

the way to the gates of the university, hoping to somehow run into her. He returned empty-handed both times. Had he succeeded, his plan had been to tell her of wanting to find out how she was doing after the accident. That was partly true. He did want to know. But it wasn't the whole truth, because he wanted to see her too.

The first week proved a very trying period. He sought to deal with it by making love everyday to his wife. He thought it would kill his interest in Randa. It didn't.

Aggie for her part was initially baffled by Idan's sudden daily appetite for sex. It was flattering at first. Then she began to notice that, even when Idan was making love to her, his mind was somewhere else. He never looked into her face. It would have destroyed the joy of making love to the actual person he desired who was in his mind. On the few occasions that she initiated their lovemaking, it proved disastrous. The sex was clumsy and hurried and hasty and completely devoid of intimacy. It was like a mechanical activity. Like swallowing a pill to cure a headache. As if he was doing her a favor. Utterly demeaning and humiliating. But she always played along and always feigned contentment.

At the office, whenever his craving for Randa became overwhelming, Idan would leave the office for the car park where they first encountered each other and the crazy drama with the woman in the blond Afro wig. Then Randa's laughter would begin to ring inside his ears. Her warm pretty face and her smile would invade his thoughts. With heat in his veins, he would recollect those moments of unease when they had discussed sugar daddies and chicken soups and smile to himself. So much experienced together in so little time.

Several times each day he would fix his telephone a stare and will it to buzz. After the first week, his hopes of ever seeing her

again began to fade. His strolls to the car park decreased. He paid less and less attention to the telephone call that was never going to come. Then three days into the second week, his office intercom buzzed twice one mid morning, implying a connection to his extension from the main exchange. He picked the receiver.

“A call for you, Sir,” the telephone operator sang.

Idan thanked her and uttered a flat hello. He had concluded that it had to be related to business. But next he knew, he had shot up like a soldier and stood to attention as if a commander-in-chief had barged unexpectedly into his office. It was Randa.

He held the receiver with both hands to keep it steady. Then it dawned on him that he was up at attention all alone inside his own office. He sat down with a sheepish grin.

“Hello,” she said again.

In his confusion he had failed to respond to the first one. He stuttered back a hello. Neither spoke. A pregnant silence. His confidence fled like a hounded hare. Should he ask her why she was calling? Would that be rude? Would it put her off advancing their relationship? “So how have you been?” he managed to ask eventually.

She replied that she was fine.

“Did the accident affect you in any way?” he asked.

“No,” she replied.

He wanted to ask her why she hadn’t called him earlier. He wanted to let her know of the agony he had gone through while waiting and hoping she would call. But her voice, at the sound of his, had been without fervor. There was more to the call than just to say hello.

“Can we meet somewhere and talk?” she asked, “Something came up!” she divulged, “We must meet. It’s urgent.”

They agreed to meet at the same spot where he had dropped

her off the first time, at the station. He set off as soon as he replaced the receiver.

She was waiting for him when he arrived, and appeared disturbed. But she managed a smile for him. Idan's heart catapulted. He had been unfaithful a few times, but none scared and troubled his mind the way it was doing with what he perceived of his developing relationship with this young and pretty woman. He had even had a couple of one-night stands about which he gave no further thought beyond the sex. But with those affairs, he had planned them. And he went into them with both eyes open to either release tension or deal with an onset of that periodically deadly marital boredom. With those affairs, he would deliberately go out and look for it. He normally had his formula all worked out, like where and when to begin and when and how to end it. He was always in control and it was all about lust. Sex to nurture his sense of adequacy when it fell short, most of the time, as a result of a vivid reminder of his possible role in their inability to conceive. No emotional attachment. And none of it ever posed a danger, not the slightest, to his marriage. But Randa was affecting him emotionally. He didn't plan their encounter. He didn't go looking for her. He didn't plan anything. She crashed her way into his life. Worse still, he wasn't feeling in control. And that was scary. His fantasies about sex with Randa didn't border on the need to nurture an inadequacy or anything. It smacked of an emotional void yearning to be fulfilled. And that worried him. Most of his sexual encounters outside marriage had been a follow up to a misunderstanding or tension to do with their inability to conceive, so it had always been easy for him to convince himself of the need to carry no guilt because his wife pushed him into it. But it was different with Randa. He couldn't link Aggie to it in any way. There was no basis for blaming his wife. So he was feeling guilty:

which wasn't comfortable at all. He and Randa hadn't had sex yet. But after anxiously waiting for her to call over the past week and a half, hearing her voice on the phone, agreeing to meet her and now, watching her stride towards his car in all her prettiness, the fear and guilt only fuelled his passion for her. He remained seated and opened the front passenger door for her. She got in, sighed heavily, leaving a helpless look on his face.

"I had an unexpected visitor yesterday," she announced blandly.

Idan's heart missed a beat. It had to be Aggie. But how and why? Nothing had happened between him and Randa. They hadn't seen each other after their first encounter. So how did Aggie get into the picture?

"She came straight to my door in my hall of residence," Randa went on, "That is why I called you. I am scared," she confessed.

Idan fought a desperate urge to grab hold of her and comfort her. "It is beyond me," he stuttered, "I mean, you sat in my car just that once. And when I called her after I dropped you, she was home. How could she have known about us? Gosh! There isn't even an 'us'. I am truly baffled. And knowing my wife...!"

"So she was your wife?" Randa spat.

Idan frowned. "Wait a minute. Are we talking about the same person here?"

"If the woman in the blond Afro wig is..."

Idan's body did a double jerk. "What?"

"Is she your...?" Randa demanded furiously.

"Hell no!"

"Your ex-wife?"

"Jeez!"

"Ex-lover?"

"Ex-nothing!" Idan shrieked. "Holy Moses! This was the last

I expected. I told you the truth that day when I said I no idea of who she was. Everything I told you then was the truth. Gosh! Maybe I should go to the police.”

“And report what?” Randa hollered.

Idan’s heart bled. Randa didn’t believe him. He could sense it. “I don’t know how else to convince you. What I told you was the truth and it’s the same truth I’ll tell the police. I can’t sit back and do nothing. What if she harms you, now that she knows exactly where to find you? Or even me? She is a stalker. She is crazy. What did she say?”

“That you were her man and I should stay away from you.”

“Jeez!” Idan wailed.

To his surprise, Randa burst into laughter.

“What is funny about this?” he blurted.

“Idan, relax,” she softened him up, “She didn’t come with an AK47. Just her and her silly wig.” And roared with more laughter.

Idan was even more confused. One moment Randa seemed angry, next moment, there she was full of laughter? The mystery about her was enticing. “I am going to protect you from now on Randa,” he said seriously, “Fate brought us together and I will take care of you, like it or not, starting now. So if you are going back to your hall, I am not allowing you to go in a taxi. I am taking you right to your door. If you feel uncomfortable about my marriage band, I am willing to remove it. I must know your hall and room number. You must also give me your contact number. And to all of this, I am not taking ‘No’ for an answer.”

Randa remained quiet throughout his long list of conditions. Now she smiled and said softly, “So it’s true.”

“What?” Idan asked bemused.

Randa’s eyes wandered and locked into his. She held it for a few tensed seconds. “Married men make the best secret lovers,”

she said softly.

It was Idan's turn to roar with laughter.

Randa smiled, submitting.

"Have you had lunch?" Idan asked abruptly. He was nervous.

Randa reached out her right forefinger to his lips and brushed it slowly across it. The air heated up inside the car in spite of the air conditioning left on by Idan.

"Let's go to Oxford street for a takeout," Idan stuttered. He had a problem breathing right.

Randa remained silent. She stretched one hand and brushed it lightly over Idan's thigh. A violent sensation shot through him. Everything inside him went wild. Randa remained unaffected.

"I must return to campus," she spoke at last, soft and calm, "But tomorrow will be fine with me. I mean, with the takeout from Oxford Street, if your offer still holds, that is."

"Of course," Idan shot out before he could control himself. His eagerness was embarrassing but he didn't really care. "Would you want me to pick you up? Here? At your hall of residence?"

Randa pondered briefly. "Let's wait till tomorrow," she breathed, "I'll call you. If it doesn't work out for tomorrow, we can make it the day after tomorrow."

Idan's heart beat rapidly. "The day after tomorrow is Saturday. I won't be in the office."

Pain registered in Randa's face.

Idan did a quick round about turn. "Look, it's fine with me if Saturday suits you. Fine, just give me a call."

"On your mobile phone?"

"Yes...no...wait a minute. Not on my mobile phone."

Randa sniggered. "I know. It's dangerous. Your wife might receive it."

Idan grinned foolishly. "I might be in the bathroom."

“So what do we do?” Randa pondered, “Because if I call you, my number will also register on yours and she will see it and probably call me. Who knows?”

Idan looked helpless.

“What about the land line?” Randa suggested, “My number won’t register on that. If she picks up the receiver instead of you, I’ll simply replace my receiver.”

Idan digested that. He disagreed. “She is a very smart woman Randa. She will become suspicious. Let us do it this way instead. Call the landline at home. Let it ring twice. Replace your receiver. Call again after one minute. Two rings. And cut. Then wait. I’ll call you on my mobile phone. What do you think?”

“Perfect,” Randa exclaimed. “Perfect.”

Randa failed to make it the following day, so their first date fell on the Saturday. She followed their planned out formula. It worked to perfection. Idan gave Aggie an excuse of meeting somebody at the office for a discussion, and drove straight to Randa’s hall. He called her when he reached the hall to notify her that he was parked downstairs and waiting for her.

“Come up,” she said surprising him excitedly.

Idan was taken aback. “Do you really want me to?”

“Yes. You know my room number, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then come. I’m waiting.”

“All...all...right.” Idan stuttered.

“Oh! And Idan?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t remove your marriage band.”

Their feet didn’t touch any part of Oxford Street that day.

They ended up in a rest house on the eastern outskirts of Accra. Further rendezvous at various times, as and when Randa wanted, or was available for it, became routine. But it was always Randa who dictated whether or not they could be together. Idan went along with it, dazed, besotted and overwhelmed.

Who was Randa?

Even he was not sure he knew completely. But once again, Randa had called. And when Randa called, he went running.

As the back of his car disappeared through the gate, Aggie stopped the washing, leaned against the palm tree and burst into tears. She wailed like a child.

Inside her head, the haunting sounds of the now too familiar signature tune sounded, mocking her. Two rings...cut...two rings...cut.

Who was Randa?

Chapter Seven

THE YELLOW INSCRIPTION on the light blue Benz bus read: VENGEANCE IS GOD'S. It caught the attention of the figure huddled in the corner of the cream Nissan Urvan bus. She sneered at it, held the Bible in her hand closer and adjusted the pair of dark glasses shielding her eyes. 'Who said?' she thought to herself and chuckled cynically.

The lorry station was hectic as usual, and colourful, with every colour of the rainbow represented in one form or the other. Headscarves, caps, agbadas and kaba blouses. But the figure's mind, remained focussed on darkness. An amorphous blackness. How could all these options and coincidences and possibilities present themselves so generously to be selected and chosen to be played around with, if fate and a divine force didn't have a hand in it? Destiny set the rules for this one game and it was going to be played to the letter. The power and control of play, lay beyond the depths of death and the heights of life.

Her mind wandered to the old man and the first time she had called on him and his two wives at their home in their small hometown. He fell headlong for the tale she presented to him right away. He felt both flattered and surprised that of all the many polygynous households in the country, she should decide on his household as the subject of her case study for the research work she said she was carrying out with some big white people from Europe and America. He was even more impressed when she added that the project was being sponsored by the United Nations

and that he would be paid ‘something small’ for his co-operation. He even had the audacity to ask if the ‘something small’ would be in dollars, since it was coming from the United Nations. One would have thought the dollar craze in this cedi country was only peculiar to the cities. He eventually accepted that even if it came in dollars, he was still going to have to convert it into cedis in a forex bureau to be able to spend it.

The plan with the old man with two wives was initially vague. They were to be involved somehow, but their roles were to be determined as the game progressed. That changed on her very first visit when the old man drew her attention to an ailment on one leg. He had been concerned that her research work might demand that he moved around with her to places. In which case, much as he would have regretted it, she would have had to reconsider his involvement because of the ailment. He wasn’t sure of what exactly it was and said it was either a boil or an insect bite. She didn’t see it, so she couldn’t make up her mind about which of the two possible causes he suspected it to actually be. Some ground herbs had been placed on it and tied with a strip of calico. He was relieved when she told him that the research would involve just talking to him to gather some information. She told him she was a trained teacher, which was true. She also had a ready answer for him when he asked her why she and her team of researchers chose his household for their case study.

“We put out an announcement on air, mostly on the private radio stations, asking listeners to propose and nominate a polygynous family for our work. We received several offers from all around the country. After carefully studying all the entries, we unanimously selected your household. Some of those who submitted entries disclosed their identities. Others didn’t. But that wasn’t an issue. I think that yours was one of those that came anonymously. Do

you have any idea who could have proposed you?" she asked.

The old man didn't hesitate. He confidently replied that it would either be his son who worked with a timber firm in Takoradi or his daughter who worked with an organization in Accra. He went on proudly that both were university graduates and added sadly that, the demands of their respective jobs made it impossible for them to visit home regularly.

The high point of that first meeting was when she handed him the white envelope containing some money, which she said was a pre-payment for his co-operation. The old man couldn't believe his eyes. He hadn't done anything at all except to talk with her, which was apparently what the work was going to be all about. And already, he had received something small?

"If I need to talk with your wives too, I will inform you!" she told him.

It was a very successful first meeting. She left him a very happy man.

Thinking about her first visit to the old man exhausted her emotionally and manifested itself in the physical. She dozed off and was sleeping when the car left the station and set off on the journey. It was the yelling of a woman breastfeeding her baby, as she informed the driver's mate that she would alight in the next town that woke Cora up. The mate also yelled the woman's request on to the driver. The driver acknowledged nothing. The yelling and the yelling on was normal practice.

The woman began to gather herself together. She removed the nipple from her baby's mouth. The baby was apparently not finished with suckling and registered a loud wail of protest. The mother ignored him and returned her long and heavy breast back inside her kaba blouse. For the rest of the short distance to where

she would get off, she sought to soothe and calm her baby to no avail. She eventually got off with her baby still wailing wildly. A new passenger joined the bus to replace the woman and her inconsolable baby. They were just over halfway into the journey. A saloon car normally took between an hour and an hour and a half to make the journey from the Accra station to the old man's hometown. A public bus never took less than three hours because not only was it slower, but it also stopped to drop off and pick up passengers at almost every station dotted along the route.

It was Cora's third visit to the old man with two wives. She adjusted herself and leaned more comfortably in her corner. Then her thoughts wandered onto the baby demanding his milk; needing it; wailing; not understanding the abrupt deprivation; not understanding anything at all. Her eyes began to droop. Memories and recollections invaded her mind.

Randa, six or seven then, and still sharing Ma and Pa's bed with them. Randa, the surprise baby, neither planned nor expected, and doted on by Ma. The initial times that Ma tried to get Randa out of their bed to join her older sister in her room, Randa wailed just like the woman's baby. She didn't understand Ma's attempt to deprive her so abruptly of her warmth and nearness. Randa didn't want to leave Ma and Pa's big comfortable bed. Ma made the corner of her side of the bed Randa's. It was against the wall, and safeguarded little Randa against falling off. Ma slept in the middle with Pa at the edge. And where Randa was concerned, everybody was happy. Then the dreams began, in which Randa always heard Ma crying. It confused Randa. Little children didn't dream about their mother's crying. They dreamt about angels and flowers and toys. But the dream about Ma crying kept recurring in Randa's sleep.

"I dreamt!" she told Cora one morning.

Cora laughed. Being thirteen years older than Randa, she was very protective of her little sister. She tried to soothe her. "Everybody dreams," she said.

"About Ma crying?" Randa asked innocently.

Cora hugged her little sister close. She didn't know what to say. "Try to dream about angels and flowers and toys, okay."

But Randa continued to dream about Ma crying. Then one day something happened. In the middle of her dream, Randa woke up. The dream should have stopped. Even with her young mind she knew that one only dreamt when one was asleep. So she became afraid because she wasn't asleep. She had woken up. Yet she could still hear Ma crying. So she turned to Ma and brought her little face close to Ma's to look. Ma was actually crying. What was happening? The dream was actually unfolding before her eyes. She called Ma, but Ma didn't respond. Maybe Ma didn't hear her. Her voice was too frail. She called again. Ma still didn't respond. Then she looked closer into Ma's face once more and became even more confused. Ma was fast asleep. Why was Ma fast asleep and crying? Pa should know. So she stretched her little body over Ma to reach Pa. But Pa was not on his side of the bed. Where was Pa? Then she understood. Ma was crying because Pa was not sleeping beside her on the bed. Maybe she should tell Cora. Her big sister would know what to do. So she got out of bed and out of the room to go to Cora's room, which was just across hers and Ma and Pa's. But in the corridor, she stopped abruptly. There was more noise and it was coming from the living room. She tiptoed towards the noise. Cora had taught her to tip toe when she didn't want to be heard or seen. When she was nearer the noise, she recognized the voice to be Pa's. And it was like Pa was also crying. But Pa was not asleep. Pa was doing something to himself. Randa decided in all certainty that if she went into

Cora's room, she would find her also crying. Her only brother Kweku was not in the house. Only herself, Cora, Ma and Pa. And if Ma and Pa and as she was certain, Cora, were all crying in the middle of the night, then it must be because of something that she did. Which was why only she wasn't crying. But what was it? What was it that she did?

She tiptoed nearer to Pa. Oh! Why didn't she see that earlier? Pa was on the telephone. Pa was whispering to someone on the telephone and also crying. Then she noticed. Pa was holding his wee-wee. So that was it. Pa's wee-wee was paining him and he was telling somebody on the telephone about it. Oh!

She turned and tiptoed back to Cora. Pa's wee-wee must have been hurting him really bad because he was so engrossed in telling the person on the phone about it that, he didn't even notice the quiet intrusion of his little daughter. So she asked Cora what they could do to help Pa's wee-wee. Cora held her close and told her that the only way they could help, was for Randa to, from that moment, leave Ma and Pa's room and come and share hers. And she shouldn't let anyone, not even Ma and Pa, know about what she saw. "It's our secret," Cora told her.

"Me and you?" Randa asked.

"Yes. Big sister and little sister's secret." She giggled.

Randa also giggled, her confusion gone. She got into bed beside Cora who lay awake long after Randa had gone back to sleep, thinking about their secret. She too had seen Pa at times on the telephone in the middle of the night. But she knew that what was going on, had nothing to do with Pa's wee-wee hurting him.

Cora started in the bus. A woman who at first glance, spelt trouble, was glaring at her. "Ah, are you in dreamland? I said push."

Cora pushed further into her corner. She didn't want any

argument. The trouble woman settled into the bigger space like someone being chauffeur driven. The driver's mate chuckled, "*Ei!*" he muttered to the young guy passenger closest to him, "Do you see how she has taken the seat as if the bus belongs to her?"

"*Hem!*" the passenger responded, "Women? When I observe the behavior of some of them, I cannot help heaping praises on God for creating Adam before Eve. Had Eve preceded Adam, *eh!* Women would have caused us to carry them on our backs twenty-four hours a day."

Cora's thoughts shifted onto their only brother, Kweku. He was waiting for her call in his office after she had called on the old man. He was nervous.

Kweku's office, spacious and well furnished, was a constant reminder of an interwoven pleasant and painful memory. God had been kind to their brother. Whenever he was in deep thought, Kweku would stare for long solemn moments at his office curtains. And Cora knew that while he waited for her to call, he would do a lot of staring at his curtains.

The curtains embodied his wife, Elsie, a graduate in textile design. Elsie had initially joined the already choked textile industry. Then one day, she attended a function. The chairman for the occasion came clad elegantly in a fine kente cloth, the sight of which created instant panic of unknown proportions among the organizers. The table, at which the chairman was going to sit together with other dignitaries, was covered in the same kente cloth. The ultimate in humiliation, chairman and table in the same kente clothe. So the table cover was quickly replaced with a bland white polyester one. It became Elsie's deciding factor. She teamed up with some traditional weavers and another textile designer, to focus on new designs purposely for household items like table-

cloths, curtains and bed-spreads. Within a short time, it turned Elsie into one of the country's exclusive designers. Her designs hung in prominent homes and offices, auditoriums, government buildings and multiple premier hotels. Kweku was proud of Elsie and thankful to God for their relationship and their two children. Pleasant memories. But it was the very day of the grand redecoration of his office with Elsie's curtains that this man he assumed initially had come to discuss business, took a seat in front of him inside this very office, opened his lips and brought Cora's world crashing down. Painful memories.

The stranger introduced himself as coming to see Kweku on behalf of Nana Afful's family. He was Cora's boyfriend then. They had been going steady for years. Kweku liked Nana Afful very much. He treated his sister well. Nana Afful also took Cora home and introduced her to his family. Then one day the smiles that used to welcome Cora when she visited Nana Afful, suddenly ceased. It followed Nana Afful's declaration to his family that he and Cora were seriously discussing marriage. His family had apparently hoped it wouldn't get to that. They were royals and it was taboo that Nana Afful would marry a woman of a family with a history of suicide. That aside, the stranger went on, did Kweku think that they could hide their other family stigma from Nana Afful's family? The truth was like straining to hold a cork under water. By all means, it would pop up to the surface sooner than later.

Kweku got offended. "If you are talking about our Ma, then let me make one point of correction. My family has no history of madness, as you appear to want to infer. Our mother fell sick, mentally sick. And like any disease, it can be cured and will be."

But the stranger was not impressed. He was there on a mission. Nana Afful's family didn't want Cora in their family. Kweku

was the appropriate person to convey that message to, and this he had done. If Kweku wanted the issue to be dealt with quietly and peacefully, then he was advising Kweku on behalf of Nana Afful's family, to encourage Cora to initiate and instigate the break-up with Nana Afful. Otherwise, it wasn't only Nana Afful's family that Kweku and Cora would have to deal and contend with but the entire clan. So for Pa's suicide and Ma's mental illness, Cora paid with a suicide of her own. A gruesome and emotional suicide. Cora never recovered from that break-up with Nana Afful. She lapsed into deep depression and let herself go. It affected her so much that she was compelled to quit full time teaching and help run Ma's shop. The rumours and the gossip that circulated about them were cruel and biased. Ma was mad, they said. Cora had also suffered a broken heart and lapsed into deep depression. And if the rumors and gossip about how Ma landed where she was was anything to go by, then was Cora also not en route to ending up where Ma had? It was in the family.

For Cora, sunshine became an enemy and gaiety a betrayal. She regarded happiness as poison and laughter taboo. She only began to laugh again when they declared their crusade.

"Woman! Can't you cover your mouth when you yawn?" a young man seated beside the woman complained, "This bus is an enclosure." The woman glared. "Why don't you say what exactly you want to say and feel free? Is it compulsory that I should cover my mouth when I am yawning?"

The young man took up her challenge. "Okay, then let me tell you the truth. Your mouth is smelling bad, that is why you should cover it."

But the young man had also underestimated the woman's cantankerousness. She moved her face as close as possible to his

face, bared open her mouth and spoke directly into his nose, “And which law in Ghana says my mouth cannot smell?”

The driver, who had been quiet throughout, issued a warning. “If you two don’t stop disturbing the other passengers, I’ll stop my vehicle and have you two out.”

The quarrel ceased immediately.

Cora smiled and checked her time. About an hour more to go. She wondered what Randa was up to at that moment. She remained awake for the rest of the trip.

Chapter Eight

About the same time that Cora was reminiscing in the bus and heading towards the hometown of the old man with two wives, Aggie who was in the office alone with Destine, brought out her chair to sit under the tree in front of the office.

Dina and Vickie were away, meeting with the partners of Budu, Stiles and Associates, a private law firm. MUTE had been trying to solicit the benevolence of a legal team who would charge very little or nothing for their services, should the need arise. And a need appeared imminent. The pastor of a dubious and little known church was putting pressure on the husband of the subject of one of MUTE's cases to sue Dina and the organization for violating their privacy. The subject, Esi Attah, and her husband, were both members of the church.

Destine also reported that she suspected someone had been trailing her since her appearance with Dina on the GMG show with 5th Wife. Pesewa's family were prime suspects, and MUTE needed the law to deal with that too. These matters suggested an urgent need for a meeting between MUTE and the law firm. The meeting went very well and stretched into the afternoon, so Budu and Stiles invited Dina and Vickie to lunch. On their return to the office, they found Aggie sitting under the tree.

"Power cut?" Dina inquired.

It was usually during a power interruption, when the fans in the office were off, and the heat inside became unbearable that they trooped outside to sit under the shady tree. So Dina was

surprised when Aggie replied that the fans were working.

Dina frowned.

"I was feeling nauseous," Aggie, explained, "I needed fresh air."

She rose to go back to the office with Dina and Vickie.

"You think you have had enough of the fresh air?" Dina joked.

They all laughed.

"How's Destine doing?" Dina inquired.

"She means business," Aggie replied, "She has finished work on the case file you gave her yesterday. Was your lunch good?"

"Excellent," Dina replied.

"Chinese?"

"What else?" Vickie retorted, "Do you think there are as many Ghanaian restaurants in China as there are Chinese restaurants here?"

They laughed some more and were still laughing as they entered the office.

"One of them was without a ring, if you get what I mean!" Vickie quipped, eyeing Dina.

She made a rude face at Vickie. "Are you a match maker on the side?"

Renewed laughter.

Then when they entered the office Dina said, "Shall we hold a short meeting in my office?"

She went ahead, expecting Aggie who was nearer her, to follow, but Aggie didn't. She stalled. Dina noticed that Destine should have followed right after Aggie, but it appeared that Aggie wanted to avoid this. So with Aggie still stalling and pretending to be busy at her table, Destine followed Dina, Vickie came next and finally, Aggie sauntered in.

Curious about what was amiss, Dina continued to observe Aggie and noticed that on both occasions during the meeting in her office, Aggie winced when Destine passed close by her. As if Destine's nearness always caused her to suffer a spell of dizziness.

Something was not right with Aggie.

"Do you need to go out for some more fresh air?" Dina asked Aggie

It hit Aggie that Dina had been observing her. "No...no, I am okay," she answered nervously.

Dina decided she would confront Aggie about her suspicion later when the two of them were alone. She proceeded with her briefing about the meeting with Budu and Stiles. "Destine, they advised that from henceforth, whenever you feel you are being trailed or followed, note down every detail. The day, the time and the place. Everything. Whatever it was that made you feel you were being followed. Everything you see and suspect. If you see someone suspicious, note down the sex, the attire, approximate age, looks, everything that can help with easy identification later. But never confront anyone on the basis of your suspicion. The person might turn it around and use it against you."

"Thank you Auntie Dina," Destine said.

They discussed the other issues raised with Budu and Stiles. Then Aggie asked what they each looked like. Were they handsome? Ugly? Plain?

Dina chuckled. "What I can say is that I am not deceived by appearance when it comes to names. Mr. Budu is almost white..."

"You mean like a white man? As in white man, black man or yellow man?" Aggie asked.

"Exactly. Full name? Yaw Ketewaba Budu. His grandfather married a British woman. Their mulatto son, Budu's father, also

married a German woman. But the family stick with their African names.” Dina revealed.

“So is he also married to a white woman?” Destine inquired.

“He is married to a woman as black as his law partner. She is Thomas Brookman Stiles’ sister,” Dina replied.

“And Thomas Brookman Stiles was not wearing a ring?” Vickie chipped in with a naughty grin at Dina.

Dina glared at her, causing them all to laugh.

Then Vickie said, “Oh, we passed by the post office. There were only two letters for MUTE.”

“And I am sure the only two letters are still inside your bag!” Dina charged.

“Old age and family troubles,” Vickie joked and went to get the letters.

She returned to hear Destine apologizing for forgetting to inform Aggie about a letter that arrived for her early in the morning.

The others were surprised. Ghana’s dream of a door-to-door postal service was yet to be realized. At present, as existed, MUTE and its personnel all had to go to the post office to open their post boxes for their letters. It was thus puzzling that a letter should be delivered to the office for Aggie.

“I think it was slipped under the door,” Destine went on, deepening the puzzle, “It got mixed up with the other stuff. That was why it escaped me. I am going to get it for you, Auntie Aggie.

Aggie sighed.

Dina seized the opportunity. “Why are you avoiding Destine as though she had a plague?” she asked Aggie.

Aggie saw no need to pretend. “Her perfume, Dina. She has been using it just these past few days, and I can’t stand it.”

Vickie was surprised. "I think it is nice?" she remarked.

"Is the scent too strong for you?" Dina asked Aggie.

Aggie stammered her reply. "It overwhelms me. Can you talk to her about it?"

Dina read what she saw as agony in Aggie's eyes. "I'll talk to her," she promised Aggie.

Destine came through the door just then holding a white envelope. Aggie tried not to react to the scent but failed desperately as Destine lingered around her to hand her the letter. She winced which prompted Dina to act immediately. "Destine," she called.

"Yes, Auntie Dina."

Dina laughed uncomfortably. "This is not the best example of democracy but I must mention something to you. Aggie is having an allergic reaction to your perfume."

"Oh God!" Destine cried, feeling very guilty, "I'm so sorry, Auntie Aggie. I am truly sorry. I got it only a few days ago. I won't wear it again. I am really very sorry."

Destine's reaction left Aggie feeling bad. "It's okay Destine," she calmed her down, "It happens sometimes. I am on medication. That probably has something to do with it."

"I am sorry Auntie Aggie. I think I should go out for a while," Destine muttered. And left Dina's small office for the bigger one shared by the rest of them.

Aggie felt terrible but Dina's face cracked into a smile. "Could it be, my dear colleague, that just when you least expected, your womb has begun to nurse a foetus? We are talking about a scent that's making you nauseous you know."

But the expected hopeful look failed to register on Aggie's face. "It's something else, Dina," she stated flatly.

Dina's face fell. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No!" Aggie responded curtly.

Vickie sought to lighten up the atmosphere. "Then at least find out what is in the letter?" she suggested.

Aggie gave the white envelope a cursory look and clucked her tongue. "Bank Statement," she declared.

"And are you not anxious to know your balance?" Dina pressed.

"I have a fair idea of it," Aggie chuckled, "And it is not pleasing to the heart."

She glanced at the back of the envelope again. Then she noticed something and frowned.

"What is it?" Vickie asked.

"There is neither a stamp nor a prepaid mark on it," Aggie muttered skeptically and tore open the envelope. She pulled out a folded plain white sheet and unfolded it. Her face instantly lost all color.

"What?" Dina said sharply, noticing Aggie's instant reaction.

Aggie didn't respond. She just continued to stare at the sheet of paper.

Without asking, Dina snatched the letter from her. Then Vickie moved closer to Dina to also have a look.

"NEMESIS?" both shrieked.

It was the only word on the sheet written boldly in red capital letters across the surface.

"Nemesis?" Vickie repeated slowly to herself, befuddled. "Isn't that some ancient Greek stuff?" And went to Dina's small bookshelf. She pulled out a dictionary, opened it and flipped through for Nemesis.

"I have it!" she exclaimed. "It says here: retribution, punishment that is just."

Aggie's face twisted up in anxiety. "That's it?" she wailed.

Dina snatched the dictionary from Vickie. She checked and

looked at her two colleagues in amazement.

“But why should anyone send you something so odd?” Vickie moaned.

Then a thought occurred to Dina. “Could it be a diversionary tactic by Pesewa’s family? Maybe they have realized we know they are trailing Destine. Maybe they found out we are talking to some lawyers. Maybe they are afraid we might initiate some legal action against them.”

“In which case where do I come in? I wasn’t even with you on the GMG show.”

Dina’s thoughts were all muddled. “Or maybe it is not related to MUTE at all,” she pondered.

She was going to summon Destine back into the office but thought better of it. Another invasion of Destine’s perfume was the last thing Aggie needed now. She went out to Destine in the general office. Her face was buried in a case file. She looked up sharply when Dina called her name.

“How did you say you got the letter you just gave to Aggie?”

“It was lying on the floor behind the door inside the office this morning when I reported for work. You already know that I am always the first person to come in.”

Dina didn’t say anything. She scrutinized Destine’s face, looking for something. A clue perhaps: to anything.

Destine became jittery. “Auntie Dina, have I blundered again?”

Dina realized she might have made Destine nervous with her scrutiny. “No,” she replied, “It has nothing to do with you. Just a slight inconvenience. It comes with the job. We had a parcel of faeces delivered to us once.”

“What?” Destine shouted, the imagination of it contorting

her face.

“And as you can see,” Dina went on, “We survived it. So in comparison, this is peanuts. See?”

Destine nodded.

Dina observed worriedly, “Destine, do you feel discouraged? I hope it doesn’t affect your interest in MUTE or cause you to consider changing your final year dissertation topic.”

“Oh no!” Destine cried, shaking her head emphatically.

“Good,” Dina commended, “I am glad to hear that.”

Dina excused herself and went out of the office to go and talk to the day watchman. He was reclining in a low chair by the gate. He rose at the sight of Dina. His duty hours were from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. After which the night watchman took over till 6:00 am the following day. If someone came to slip the letter under the door, he should know about it.

He didn’t, when Dina asked him about it.

Could it have been slipped under the door at dawn? When the night watchman was still on duty? He wondered. Yet was that the case, he was certain that the night watchman would have drawn his replacement’s attention to it before leaving in the early morning. He could also not see how someone could have come all the way to the main office door with the letter without the knowledge of the night watchman, because unlike him who always had the gate closed but not locked, it being daytime, the night watchman never left the gate unlocked. So anyone wanting to slip a letter under the door would necessarily have had to notify the night watchman.

“What if the person didn’t want to be seen as the one delivering the letter?” Dina wondered. “How could such a person have gotten into the yard with the gate locked from inside?”

The day watchman had no answer to that except the same

suspicion Dina also had, that the person must have jumped the wall.

Dina returned to Vickie and Aggie in her office. "Do any of you know the story of the night watchman who went confidently to his master early one morning with six little numbers?" she asked.

Vickie urged her on.

"With great pomp and pride he told his master that the numbers were revealed to him by God in a dream in the night. He was sure they would be that week's winning numbers, but he lacked the money to stake them. He suggested giving his master the numbers, so that if he won, they would share the money. The master accepted the deal, collected the numbers, staked and won. And in keeping with their arrangement, gave half of it to the watchman. Then dismissed him.

"Why?" the baffled watchman cried to his master, "Did his master think that he wanted to stop work because of the lotto winning?"

His master studied him. "How did you say you came by the numbers?" he asked the watchman.

"I said that God revealed it to me in a dream," replied the watchman, somehow irritated by his master's apparent quick forgetfulness, "And I am sure more will follow, Master. More!" he added pompously.

His master nodded, quite impressed. "No doubt! No doubt!" he responded with a huge smile, "And now tell me: what were you doing when you had the dream in which the numbers were revealed."

Now Aggie laughed.

Did someone jump the wall to come and slip the letter under the door while the night watchman was having lotto numbers

revealed to him in a dream?

They all wondered.

About the time that Aggie found the strength to laugh at Dina's joke about the watchman, Cora bade farewell to the old man with the two wives far away in his hometown.

Two events, two characters, different locations, and a common thread.

Mobile phone reception in the old man's hometown was not possible, so when Cora left the old man's house for the lorry station, she passed the town's only communication center and called Kweku in his office.

"Did everything go well?" Kweku asked anxiously

"Yes. Done." Cora assured him, "I am on my way back."

Chapter Nine

HE WAS TALL and lean, with a slight hunchback and he was wearing a long white robe reaching to the ground. Across his waist, the ends of a bright red sash, tied loosely on the left, hung about a foot above the edge of the robe. His feet were bare.

The security man at the front gate of Harvest FM pursed his lips as he noticed the tall lean man approach. He remembered the one thousand cedis change the newsvendor gave him earlier and searched his pockets for it.

‘Another security guard,’ the tall lean man noticed. Not the same one he met the first time. He reached the gate, walked up to the guard and faced him, almost halting at attention.

“I have been sent by God to a man here called Sylv Po!” he announced.

The guard dipped his hand into his pocket and brought out the one thousand cedi note. He was in no mood for a crazy self proclaimed Man of God.

“Did God also tell you not to greet anyone at all today?” the guard asked. Then handed out the thousand cedi note to him, adding, “You take this offertory and go. Today is not good. Maybe next time will be better, if you remember me in your prayers for prosperity.”

The tall man smiled piteously in obvious sympathy for the lost soul of the poor in spirit. He ignored the note and in the same flat tone, said once more, “I have been sent by God to a man here called Sylv Po.”

The security guard decided that someone else must handle the matter. He entered the security booth and placed a call to the reception. Could Sylv Po be informed that someone was looking for him at the gate? Then lowering his tone, added, "Please tell him it is better he does not ask for the person to be allowed to come to the reception to wait for him. I think that by all means, he should come to see him at the gate."

The receptionist understood the coded message. "In other words not someone anyone would be pleased to see inside the building?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for the tip," the female receptionist laughed.

The security guard emerged from the booth and went back to the gate and informed the tall lean man that Sylv was coming out to see him.

The lean man nodded piously. Thirty minutes later, Sylv had still not showed up at the gate. The guard became edgy. He didn't fancy the tall lean man's deportment. He seemed too patient and too enduring. And was too much of everything not bad, even if it was patience and endurance?

He entered the booth and placed another call to the receptionist. He was told that a call had been made to Sylv's studio to deliver the message to him. The receptionist asked if the guard wanted her to connect him to Sylv for a direct repeat of the message.

"Yes," the guard responded.

The receptionist complied.

Seconds later, Sylv's deep voice barked a "Hello" on the line.

"Sir, this is gate security. Your visitor is still waiting, Sir."

"Visitor?" Sylv didn't seem to recollect. Then he did and exclaimed, "Oh! Oh! Mine! Is it the same one the receptionist called me about?"

“Yes Sir.”

“Young or old? Pretty? Oh dear me! Do you think she has given up on me already? Hey! Or is it a relative? That aunt of mine?”

“No Sir.”

Sylv sighed. “Well at least thank God for that.”

The security guard giggled. “Sir, I wouldn’t be so sure,” he remarked.

“Of what?” Sylv asked.

“The thank God bit, Sir. Your visitor claims to be coming with a message from the very Almighty One, Sir. The very one you just thanked.”

Sylv frowned. “Who is it? I mean, the visitor?”

“A man claiming to be a prophet, Sir.”

“A what?”

“Prophet, Sir. Long white robe, red belt...the one they wear...”

“Sash.”

“Yes Sir. And bare-footed, Sir.”

“Barefooted?”

“Yes Sir. Which was why I didn’t let him inside the building to the reception.”

“Thanks. But can’t you tell him something that will make him go away? Give him something. I’ll refund you.” Sylv entreated the guard.

The guard informed Sylv that he had already done so and that the prophet turned it down. “He looks serious, Sir,” he added.

“Serious about what?”

“About God having sent him to come and deliver a message to you.”

“Oh man!” Sylv wailed, “Look, I am just a few minutes from

going back on air. Do you think the message will take long?' he joked.

"Considering where it is supposed to be coming from, Sir, I really cannot tell. The length of it is probably beyond mortal man's comprehension," he replied laughing.

Sylv lightened up. "Look, please tell him something. Find something to tell him to make him go away. Tell him I am on my way to the studio and won't be out till in about two hours' time."

"Yes Sir."

The guard replaced the receiver and relayed Sylv's message to the tall lean man.

The man took his time with his response. He looked around, spotted a low wall, moved to it, sat down gingerly and announced to the baffled guard that he would wait.

For the guard, the two hours behind the gate, studying the tall lean man outside through the iron fencing, felt like two years.

As soon as the two hours was up, the guard called the receptionist again, declined a direct link up with Sylv, and asked that Sylv be told that the prophet waited for the entire two hours and was still waiting for him.

Sylv was urged to go and see the prophet in the company of a security guard. He obliged and came to the gate. Sylv got into the security booth. The security man stood guard at the entrance of the booth. Then the guard at the gate summoned the prophet to the window.

"My name is Prophet Zechariah Abednego!" the tall lean man introduced himself to Sylv without prompting and stretched out his hand to Sylv through the window.

A picture flashed through Sylv's mind of a murderer who pretended to be friendly and offered his intended victim his hand, only to pull the victim through the window to his death. Sylv

shuddered at the thought. He refused the prophet's hand. "I am not here for handshakes, Prophet. You said you are a prophet, no?"

"Yes. Prophet Zechariah Abednego."

"Good, Prophet. Now may I ask what you want with me?" Sylv said trying to be polite.

Prophet Abednego remained cool and calm. He sensed Sylv's unease and was enjoying it. And when he had had enough, snapped, "I came to you upon God's orders."

"Good Lord!" Sylv groaned.

Abednego ignored Sylv's reaction and proceeded with the patience of a tortoise in motion, deady slow but certain and confident of arriving at its destination.

"I have come to solicit your help," Abednego announced, "I am fervently looking for someone on the orders of God and ..."

"Two? Two of us? Two orders? From God?" Sylv burst in.

Abednego smiled graciously. "Yes. The first order was for me to locate the person. The second order was for me to come to you to help me to locate the person," he claimed.

Sylv groaned again. "On the orders of the Almighty God Himself? The whole high and mighty He?"

"Yes."

"Me? Poor mortal Sylv?"

"Yes."

Sylv concluded that he had a mental case on hand and had to handle Abednego with care to avoid an unpleasant scene. Which was exactly what would happen if he decided to simply walk away and leave Abednego. More so, because Abednego was inside the yard of the station, having been let in through the gate to meet Sylv at the security booth. He considered the possibility of bringing in the police to bundle Abednego away, but that could also be manipulated by rival radio stations and hyped as an example of

excessive use of force by the police and over-reaction by the GMG host regarding a fan of his. He had to be patient with Abednego and play along till the game was over.

“What is the name of the person God wanted you to locate? Is the person male or female?”

“Male,” Abednego replied, “But I don’t have his name.”

“No?”

“No.”

“God did not reveal his name to you?”

“No.”

Sylv feigned seriousness and said, “That is not encouraging, is it. So can I suggest something?”

Abednego nodded. He saw that he was being humoured but didn’t seem affected by it.

“Why don’t you go back to where you came from and seek God’s intervention for more clues. Then when you get it, you can return for us to start the serious business of finding the person.” Sylv bantered.

Abednego smiled.

“Prophet,” Sylv mocked on, “I am sure that a few days of serious fasting would do the trick. What do you think?”

Abednego’s reaction was swift, no longer the cool and tolerant prophet swallowing it all. His eyes went cold. His features hardened. “You mock God?” he snarled.

Sylv was taken completely aback. “I was only...”

“You think you drive a fine car and have a good job and live in a beautiful place and have a good life so you can mock God?”

The intensity of his tone threw Sylv off guard. It was crazy. Every grain of his common sense was yelling at him to have Abednego bundled away, yet his instincts which had made him the talk show host that he was, wouldn’t will him to. Then he

further amazed the guards when he asked to be let out of the booth and insisted on going to the reception with Abednego. He compromised, after the guards having raised strong objection, decided to allow the guard to be close at hand.

At the reception, Sylv and Abednego sat down on the couch facing each other. Another guard sneaked in discreetly to back the first one. He took up position by the entrance where Abednego would inevitably head towards should he decide to or need to bolt.

Then Sylv addressed Abednego in Twi. "Prophet, you have come to me with a bizarre request. You do agree with me that it is bizarre, don't you?"

Abednego's lips extended into a no-comment smile.

Sylv added, "Well at least, you are not accusing me of mocking God."

"No." Abednego replied simply.

"Good. So we can begin to do some serious talking," Sylv declared.

"That is what I have been doing all along," Abednego stated flatly.

Sylv ignored the bait to digress into another wrangling. "Alright," he began, "How do you expect me to begin to do anything without a name?"

"If God had wanted me to know the person's name, He would have revealed it to me," Abednego countered.

Muff entered the reception and sat down beside Sylv. Then he placed his lips close to Sylv's ear and whispered, "We are going places, Sylv. First, Pesewa's 5th Wife. Now a rep of the whole good Lord Himself."

Sylv smiled and addressed Abednego again. "Do you know what this person does for a living? Did God...and I mean that in earnest...reveal that one to you? Say, for instance, where the

person lives?”

“No.”

That irritated Sylv. He was doing his best to co-operate and have this over and done with and Abednego wasn't helping much.

“With all due respect, Pastor...”

“Prophet!” Abednego cut in.

“Whatever!” Sylv retorted.

“Prophet!” Abednego insisted.

Sylv began to doubt the wisdom in bringing Abednego into the Harvest FM building. “Okay Prophet. Now, Prophet, don't misunderstand me. Try to also understand my anxiety. I am just a mortal man and I have got work to do back in the studio.”

Abednego nodded kindly.

“Okay,” Sylv went on, “All that you know about the person is that it is a male. You don't know his name; where he lives or what he does. Yet I am supposed to help you track him down?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because God said you would.”

“Just like that?” Sylv clicked his fingers.

Abednego shrugged.

“Look,” Sylv pressed, “God must have given you a clue. He is a merciful God, that much I know. And since he created us, He knows our limitations. So he must have given you a clue.

Abednego's self-satisfaction got the better of him, seeing Sylv's frustration. He smiled vainly.

Sylv noticed. “Look Prophet, let's talk mortal to mortal. Tell me, do you have a problem with this person? A score to settle with him? Are you hoping to use me for your own ends? Free of charge? While leaving me to think that I have done some good in the eyes of God?”

To everyone's surprise, Abednego burst into laughter.

Sylv interpreted Abednego's reaction as nervousness, which could only mean that he was on the right path about Abednego. He pressed on. "Prophet, seriously, did this person dupe you? Did he promise to find you accommodation and disappear with your money? Or maybe he promised to use his connections at an embassy to get you a visa and bolted with your cedis and few dollars? Which?"

Abednego didn't flare up, as Muff had feared. He only smiled, this time modestly and replied, "No. It is as I said. God gave me a message for him and asked me to begin to look for him at this radio station."

Sylv nearly choked on his laughter. "Prophet, seriously, can you say you have any idea at all why God chose to speak to you instead of directly to the person?"

Abednego who had rediscovered humility, retorted, "I don't question God's ways. How dare you question God's ways?"

Sylv's patience snapped. "I am not questioning God's ways, Prophet. And if any one of us here is mocking God, it is you. Why would God contact only you and leave me who is supposed to be your partner in this mission?"

Abednego fixed Sylv a hard stare. "Are you a prophet?" he exhorted.

Sylv's patience disintegrated completely. "What has my not being a prophet got to do with it? Why do you guys so pompously allot to yourselves this self-imposed special position of proximity to the Almighty," he raged.

It was Abednego's turn to be astounded. "Gentleman, God sent me. That is all I can say."

"You met Him?"

"Who?"

“God.”

“No. He spoke to me. I have ears that can hear His voice. He spoke to me because I can hear His voice. I heard the message He gave me clearly,” Abednego claimed.

Sylv studied Abednego suspiciously. “Which tribe do you belong to, Prophet?”

Abednego cocked one brow. “How is that relevant to my mission?” he charged.

“In which language did God speak to you? Fanti? Ga? Ewe? Swahili?” Sylv charged.

Abednego frowned. “You really wish to mock God, don’t you?”

This really annoyed Sylv. “If it is all about me mocking God, then get up and go!” He snarled. “Leave immediately.” And he got up.

The guards closed in on Sylv while another two materialized from inside the building and positioned themselves beside Abednego, who appeared dazed and overwhelmed about the sudden turn of events. He made a quick sign of the cross and said loudly, “You asked a question. I shall respond. No, God spoke none of the languages you mentioned. God is above languages. He spoke to me. That is all I can say. Ears like yours cannot hear His voice. Not even if He speaks in any of the languages you mentioned. God’s order to me was to seek out a son of His who has rejected His outstretched arms. He has been attacked in one leg by the devil.”

Sylv growled. “That’s it?”

“No!” Abednego pronounced, “God showed me the way to reach him. Please listen to this carefully. It was what led me to you. God revealed to me that the person is the father of one of a group of four women. They form an organization which has a

special relationship with you and this radio station.”

Sylv’s head shot up.

“The person lives in his hometown with his two wives,” Abednego went on.

Sylv didn’t react to that. But his mind had gone into a whirlwind. He had worked with some women’s organizations, but none of them except MUTE comprised four women. And it was with MUTE that he had a special relationship. So if Prophet Abednego was up to something, then he had done some serious homework and meant business, whatever his goal was. He couldn’t afford to dismiss the prophet and his agenda.

Sylv excused himself and went into the studio, leaving Abednego at the reception. He placed a call to Dina at the office and summarized the whole strange drama to her, promising to provide more details later, knowing he didn’t make much sense, asked Dina, “You four...”

“Us four here at MUTE?” Dina asked.

“Yes. Which other...”

“I meant that, us four as in Dina, Vickie, Aggie and Destine or Dina, Vickie, Aggie and Kabria?” Dina asked.

Sylv pondered briefly and replied, “I think it’s you permanent four. Destine is only passing through, isn’t she?”

Dina agreed.

“And now listen,” Sylv told Dina, “You four, are you all there?”

“No. Kabria is on leave.” Dina informed Sylv.

“Okay, if what I am about to ask affects none of you permanent three there now, then you will have to call Kabria right after and ask her. Then call me. So, for you three there, which of you has the father staying in your hometown?”

Dina threw the question to the whole office.

“My father is dead,” Destine repeated.

“That makes two of us Sylv. Mine is also dead.” Dina disclosed.

Aggie and Vickie moved nearer to Dina. Vickie placed her lips to the mouthpiece in Dina’s hand and screeched, “My father lives in our hometown.”

“Mine too,” Aggie added.

“Does anyone know about Kabria’s parents?” Dina asked.

No one was certain.

Dina got curious. “Sylv, what is up?” she asked.

“I can’t explain now. Not much of it anyway. I am also trying to make some sense of it. But let’s get this over and done with. Ask Vickie and Aggie which of theirs is polygamous.” Sylv directed.

Dina relayed the inquiry with a pinch of mischief. “Which of you is polygynous?” she yelled.

The office erupted into laughter.

“It is polyandry for us, Sylv!” Vickie screamed into the mouthpiece, “which I would love to be a part of!” To more laughter.

“Dina, I am serious.” Sylv wailed, “ask them which of their father’s has two wives!”

Dina did.

Aggie’s face fell like a rock. “My father does,” she stuttered.

Sylv and Muff hurried back to the reception with this new information about Aggie. They knew they now had to listen to Abednego, whoever he was.

But Abednego was gone.

“He remembered that he left his Bible on the stone block outside the gate. He’s gone to pick it up,” the receptionist told them, “He said he would be right back.”

Sylv and Muff waited for Abednego for a while. When he didn’t return, they went to check on him at the gate. But he wasn’t there

either. They checked outside the gate where previously Abednego had waited for two hours, but to no avail. The mysterious prophet was gone like the wind, disappeared as if into thin air, leaving behind a whirlwind of confusion.

“He smiled and waved at us when he passed,” one security guard at the gate revealed. “We thought you had finished with him.”

Sylv turned to Muff, “What do you think?”

“Pesewa’s family,” Muff stated firmly without hesitation, “it must be them.”

“To achieve what?” Sylv wondered, “we are only doing our job. Pesewa committed suicide. They wanted the world to believe he died of natural causes. The man was HIV positive. They concluded that his young 5th Wife probably went sleeping around with other men, Pesewa being too old to satisfy her, and got infected. But the suspected wife has tested negative. So because we revealed all that on air they sent us a prophet? To do what? Unsettle us?”

It didn’t make complete sense to Muff. “If it was that straightforward, then where does Aggie’s polygynous father come in?” he mused. “And MUTE?”

“Well, at least Aggie’s father has one thing in common with Pesewa, doesn’t he?”

“What?” Muff asked.

“Polygyny,” Sylv opined unconvincingly.

Muff shook his head. “That is not it.”

“I know,” Sylv concurred. “A game is in play here and we are nowhere close to identifying it, let alone know or grasp its rules. We are missing something, Muff. I can feel it in my bones. But what? – Why not let us call 5th Wife’s sister.”

When they called her, 5th Wife’s sister suggested that they meet.

Pesewa's family had held a series of meetings, but the first major family meeting was due the following week. Most of Pesewa's children living abroad had now arrived, and 5th Wife's family head had been informed accordingly. Obviously 5th Wife wouldn't attend. Her sister would most likely be delegated by the family head to go instead. Even then, she still didn't trust Pesewa's family and what they might do or what tricks they might be up to. She was wary of especially Pesewa's sisters. She would thus feel safer if Dina or any other member of MUTE could accompany her.

Muff and Sylv agreed to meet her for further discussions and to inform Dina of her request.

Chapter Ten

MENA KAKRABA THREW the two red seeds in her hand on to the flat grinding stone tablet. She pounded them furiously with the smaller oval stone, crushing them as if they were her deadly enemies. Then she proceeded to grind them together with the powdered brown dried roots. The seeds splashed a bright redness into the mixture like blood against skin, and eventually succumbed to the mild brownness. The paste turned a burnt sienna colour.

Mena Penyin stirred the fresh fish palm-oil stew on the coal pot fire and stole another look at her co-wife.

Kakraba stopped grinding abruptly, as if an inner voice had commanded her to. She fixed a stare on to the herbal mixture, caught in the salient ecstasy of its combined powers. She was oblivious to Penyin observing her. Kakraba appeared struck imperious to stimulus, rendered dead to physical control and gripped in the jaws of a vice only she could feel. She held the smaller grinding stone firmly in the left hand while simultaneously, the right arm, moving like it was detached from the rest of her body, plunged back into the small earthenware bowl containing more of the red seeds. Red like blood and hot like pepper. It was as if her right hand was acting unconsciously on its own without cognizance to the rules of the brain.

Penyin's quietness was as pervasive as the dead. Her intuition fed her thoughts about what Kakraba was thinking of doing and it troubled her. She watched her co-wife in absolute silence.

Kakraba opened her right hand. Inside her palm were four red seeds. Dark thoughts danced in her eyes. They sparkled. Then the corners of her lips extended into a realm of mischief. Her right hand in which were the red-hot seeds, tilted over the burnt sienna mixture on the stone tablet.

“Kakraba don’t!” Penyin snapped.

Her tone could cut. It was hoarse and stern. A twig cracked. Something snapped and jolted Kakraba from her trance. Her head jerked up. What she had nearly done hit her like a storm. Her eyes narrowed. Dawn broke. She turned her head slowly toward Penyin, with a deep frown. Her neck felt as though it were hooked on to a concrete block. The red-hot seeds glared back at her, laughing, mocking her. Tears rushed to her eyes. She began to cry. The additional four red-hot seeds, had she added them to the mixture, would have gotten their husband Agya Ntifor, gnashing his teeth and wailing like a child in raw anguish upon their application to the affliction on his leg.

“Why?” Penyin asked sadly, “Why did you almost do that?”

Kakraba attempted to reply but her voice failed her. Then engulfed by emotions, she succumbed to the break down of control and let out the tears in torrents.

Penyin waited patiently for her co-wife to shed all the stored up tears. Then she asked again, “Why?”

Kakraba wiped the tears off her face with one corner of her cover cloth and blew her nose into it. Then she lifted her eyes into Penyin’s face and sobbed, “It’s the woman. That teacher from the city who claims to be doing some research work with him. She was here again. She came when you had gone to the market for the dry plantain leaves for your Fanti kenkey business. I was getting my bread ready for the oven. I pretended to be completely engrossed in what I was doing, but I was eavesdropping and ob-

serving them from the corner of my eye. And I don't like what I saw, Penyin. It was her third visit and it was glaringly clear that our husband was completely taken in by her. What information is she squeezing out of him and what is she telling him in return? Today both of them talked a lot. And they laughed a lot together too, Penyin. A lot. She also stayed very long. What was it they were talking and laughing about so much?"

Penyin burst into laughter.

Kakraba was baffled.

"Was that what all of this was about?" Penyin asked, "Jealousy?" And roared with more laughter.

Kakraba was appalled. "I am suspicious of her, Penyin. That is what all this is about. Our husband is too trusting of her. And he never tells us what he told her and what they discussed. Just a few remarks here and there. Don't you think she is controlling what she wants him to tell us?"

Penyin was flabbergasted. "Kakraba, do you know of something that I don't know about? Has Ntifer indicated that he wants her for his third wife?"

Kakraba dismissed Penyin's suggestion with a wave of one hand. "You know very well that Ntifer will not divulge something like that to me without discussing it first with you, the senior wife. No. It is something else. She didn't come empty-handed this time."

Penyin chuckled. "She didn't come empty-handed the first time either. Have you forgotten about the white envelope containing money that she gave our husband? And since Ntifer refused to disclose the amount of money inside to us, why should any subsequent one she brings him interest us?"

Kakraba shook her head in disagreement. "I am not talking about another white envelope. She came with a Bible," she disclosed.

Her senior rival was astounded. “And is that a bad thing? A Bible?”

Penyin’s attitude irritated Kakraba. “It is not the Bible by itself Penyin,” Kakraba insisted, “It is what I overheard her inject into our husband’s head.”

“Oh Kakraba, you see? That is why you shouldn’t have eaves-dropped in the first place. She was interviewing him for her work, not us. Now see how upset you are over something you heard and which wasn’t meant for your ears?”

“Then for your information, I shall refuse to be a part of this suspicious research work of hers, if it comes to her wanting to talk to us too!” Kakraba declared.

“You can’t do that!” Penyin retorted, “Ntifor has already accepted her money. He has committed us all to it by that.”

“Not me!” Kakraba maintained defiantly, “Do you know what she came discussing with him today? Things she said the Bible had pronounced good and bad.”

Kakraba’s continued reference to the Bible as a basis for her stance disturbed Penyin. “Kakraba,” she sighed, “Do you maybe suspect that our husband is somehow flattered a little by the teacher’s attention? Don’t forget that old though he is, he is still a man. He could be taken in by her vibrancy, – and with the Bible, who knows? Maybe her work involves winning souls for Christ.”

“No Penyin, no! It isn’t as simple and straightforward as that.” Kakraba countered vehemently, “There is more to it. She has something in mind. I can feel it in my bones.”

“I can’t,” Penyin retorted, her suspicion soaring. Though they lived in harmony as co-wives of the same husband under one roof, it was never lost on any one of them what they were to one another. Rivals. So did Kakraba possibly know more than she was disclosing? Was she keeping it to herself for a reason? Was that the

reason why she wasn't being forthright about it?

While Penyin battled with her suspicions, Kakraba also struggled with a dilemma. She knew she would make better sense to Penyin if she opened up and told her the full facts of what she knew. But she saw the risk of incurring Penyin's displeasure. She had already lied to Penyin about their husband not having mentioned anything to her. Telling Penyin everything would expose the fact that their husband had shown disrespect towards her, the senior wife, by mentioning an issue to Kakraba first. Yet, the issue warranted that their husband mention it to Kakraba right away and not as yet to Penyin.

Penyin, who was observing Kakraba, noticed her edginess and knew that she was right in her suspicion. "You do know something, don't you?" she charged Kakraba.

Kakraba turned her face away.

"Did Ntifor show disrespect towards me and discuss something first with you?" Penyin pressed on. Her pain became evident.

Kakraba couldn't hold back any longer. "He had to, Penyin."

"He had to?" Penyin howled.

"Yes. Because had he discussed it with you first, it would have felt like a double-edged dagger driven into my body. It is all still suspicion and what I feel in my bones, but I think the teacher is pitting us against each other, Penyin."

The pain of insult was replaced by anxiety. "How?" Penyin wailed.

Kakraba swallowed hard and spoke slowly. "The manner in which Ntifor mentioned it was very casual, as if he took it all lightly and was amused by it. But the essence is that he listened to her. She told him, and he listened. He didn't stop her. He didn't warn her not to overstep his hospitality and intrude on his family affairs. He allowed her to say it all to him. And he listened to

it. He brought it up with me because he had stored it up there!” She knocked a forefinger to her forehead. “And that is my greatest worry. Because not only did he store it up there, but he thought about it and analyzed it. Which was why he did what he did and why you feel insulted. He analyzed it seriously enough to realize that it was wiser to go against tradition and bring it up with me first.”

Now Penyin became alarmed. Her voice was low and intense. “What did Ntifor say the teacher said to him?”

Kakraba lowered her eyes, untied and retied her cover cloth and blurted, “She told him that he was living in sin having both of us as wives!”

“Whaaaaaaat!!!!”

“Yes Penyin. That was it that she told him.”

Penyin circled round and round and round and came to an abrupt halt. “She told him such absolute nonsense and he sat there and listened to her?” she yelled.

“He didn’t just listen, Penyin. He also stored it inside his head.” Kakraba added.

“What did she mean?” Penyin continued, “who does she think she is?”

Kakraba had by now cooled down. She chuckled and said, “Now that you know, have you seen yourself asking the same questions I asked? Wondering like I did? Worrying like I did? She planted a seed inside his thoughts. It might take time to mature. Now, it is only a seed, but do we know into what plant it could grow into?”

Penyin’s fury manifested itself in loud wheezing.

Kakraba said, “He never really introduced her to any of us, do you remember? All he talked about was how we should feel honoured that she wanted us in her research work, and he kept

hammering on about how highly educated she was. As if none of our children are highly educated. Ah!”

Penyin frowned thoughtfully. “Could all this research work be a farce? Could she be someone else who is after our husband?”

The implication of Penyin’s deduction hit Kakraba. “Can she fool him so easily like that?” she asked.

Penyin raised her eyes to the heavens and cried, “God forgive us for thinking this way about our husband, but this teacher just plunges into our lives, claims to be doing some research work, turns our husband’s head with money and attention, brings along a Bible and comes preaching to him about living in sin with us. May the gods rock her bottom wherever she is. Was she even born when we became co-wives?”

Suddenly Kakraba decided that she knew what all this was leading to. “I think Ntifor wants her for his third wife.”

A brief period of silence elapsed. Then Penyin shot out abruptly, “Do you think he will be having children with her? Isn’t she too old to begin to have children?”

Kakraba shrugged helplessly. “If he marries her, I don’t see why not, even with his over seventy years. She doesn’t seem to me to be even forty years yet. Do you think she would let her babies turn into blocks in her womb? She will definitely want to have children with him.”

This conclusion they had arrived at gnawed at both of them. Why would an educated woman like that want to get married to an old and far less educated man like their husband Ntifor, whose financial position was so unimpressive that he accepted envelopes of money?”

Suddenly Penyin lightened up. “Kakraba, I have it. That’s it! It fits. That must be the reason why she is after our husband.”

But Kakraba didn’t share in Penyin’s excitement.

Penyin noticed. She pondered. "I was careless with my words, wasn't I?" she reproached herself, "About the teacher being too old to start having her own children?"

Kakraba winced.

"Our daughter is in the same situation," Penyin added flatly.

Kakraba groaned. "Ah Penyin, the gods should have smiled on her and granted her one, just one child. Her grandmothers blamed us for it. That is the worst part. They concluded that our daughter's inability to conceive was due to the many books she studied at the university. Do you know that because of our daughter, two women in the family house are dissuading their daughters from studying up to university level? They fear their daughters will also fail to bear them grandchildren."

Penyin consoled her younger rival. "Kakraba, the gods have not frowned upon us either. We should be grateful to them for what we have, instead of moaning about what we don't have. Our sons have blessed us with grandchildren..."

"And made the mothers of their respective wives happy." Kakraba cut in sharply. "Ah, Penyin," she sobbed, "What if the strange teacher actually becomes our rival? If she proves capable of bearing children with our husband and goes ahead to do just that, have you thought of the implication? His children with her would be far younger than the grandchildren born him by his sons."

"Don't shed tears for her," Penyin urged Kakraba, "She doesn't deserve it. You deserved the tears I shed for you the day I learnt I was in the final days of having Ntifor for myself alone. When I knew I was going to begin sharing him with you. But those were tears well shed. You came into the household to ensure the continuation of this family's lifeline. But the teacher, what new thing is she bringing to this family? She is an intruder. That is

what she would be if she became our rival. And intruders deserve no tears. So stop weeping.”

Kakraba wiped her face and cleared her nose. “Ah, Penyin, I lay awake at night asking myself how I would feel if our daughter comes crying to us one day that due to her infertility, her husband had decided to take on another woman?” she resumed, sobbing, “She is not like us.”

“Idan won’t do that!” Penyin stated vehemently, “They are different. They are not like us. They are two educated people. They are of a different generation. Times have changed. And don’t forget the one important point. They married in a Christian church. Their rules are different.”

“Oh Penyin, really,” Kakraba wailed suddenly, “Then what are you and I doing, suspecting our husband of wanting to take on the teacher for his third wife? She carries a Bible too, Penyin.” And the tears began to flow again. Kakraba couldn’t help herself.

Penyin intervened and tried to help her young rival to deal with the prospect. “One of the ploys I used to deal with the pain of having to share Ntifor with you years ago...”

“Pain?” said Kakraba, amazed. She was confounded, “You never talked about any pain, Penyin.”

“Oh Kakraba, why do we normally shed tears. When I talked about the tears I shed in those final days I knew I was having him to myself alone for the last time, do you think it was for fun and joy?”

“Sometimes we shed tears because we are happy, Penyin, don’t we?” Kakraba muttered sadly.

“I know,” Penyin conceded, “But the tears I shed then was for the pain I felt, knowing he was all mine for only a few more days. Yet the need for him to father children as a married man was a

strong enough reason for me to contain my pain. I even felt sorry for you somehow, Kakraba.”

Kakraba was flabbergasted. This was obviously something Penyin had been harboring for decades. The right day and the right moment to spill it out had taken a long time to come, but it had and Penyin wasted no time.

“You felt sorry for me?” Kakraba blurted.

“Yes. You were a young girl and you knew he made you his second wife for the sake of procreation. I thought of how often you may have wondered about whether he would have taken you on as his second wife had I been able to bear him children.”

“I never thought about that!” Kakraba muttered.

“Well, I did,” Penyin declared, “Even while I shed my tears. Do you recollect the many nights that even though it was my turn to share his bed, he entreated me with words and gifts of pacification to exhibit maturity and kind understanding for his wish and preference to have you share his bed instead? Did you know what it implied? The indirect message it relayed to me was that sleeping with me was a waste of his seed at a time when he wanted children? Yet even when you had your first child and were nursing, he still found excuses not to have me share his bed. He had put it inside his head that I wasted his seed. It killed his desire for me. See why I had more than my fair share of tears?”

The final words hit Kakraba hard. “Penyin,” she called. A thought had stirred in her head, “Do you harbour some hatred for me after all these decades as co-wives?”

Penyin was alarmed. Had she spoken too much? “Oh Kakraba, no!” she begged. “May the gods forbid. And may such words not reach the ears of the ancestors. Hatred for you? No Kakraba. No. A little jealousy, yes. Even till today. I am human, Kakraba. You are the mother of all his children. And if...”

“Our children, Penyin. The children I bore with him belong to us all. Our children, Penyin.”

Penyin’s face broke into a grateful smile. “I know, Kakraba. But the creases and folds and marks of childbirth are on your belly, not mine. That is the one reality that will never go away.” She turned her attention back to the fresh fish palm oil stew.

Kakraba studied her senior rival briefly and returned to the herbal paste on the grinding stone, minus the extra red-hot seeds. After a bit more grinding, she sought Penyin’s opinion on the texture. Penyin pinched and rubbed a little of the paste between her thumb and forefinger. “Smooth enough,” she nodded at Kakraba.

Kakraba placed the small grinding stone down and scraped the paste together with the side of her forefinger into a ball. She wrapped it into a piece of fresh paw-paw leaf and asked Penyin skeptically, “The swelling on Ntifor’s leg, have you seen it?”

“Yes. Why?” Penyin also asked.

“Do you think it’s a boil?” Kakraba asked.

“What else can it be?” Penyin replied, “Why? Doesn’t it look like a boil to you?”

Kakraba pondered. “If it’s a boil, then it’s one of those evil ones.”

“Cow boil?” Penyin asked.

“Yes. According to him, he began to feel something there following his return from inspecting his cocoa farms. And you know how it is with family property sometimes,” Kakraba replied.

“So do you think it is spiritual? Did he mention any conflict with anyone?” Penyin inquired.

“No. But that is not my worry. I think that it is not even a boil at all. Not a regular one and not a cow boil. It is not a boil. I don’t know what it is but I know what it isn’t, which is a boil.”

Kakraba insisted.

Penyin began to wonder if Kakraba might have a point. "Did you touch it? Did he allow you to?" she shot out.

Kakraba sensed a tone of jealousy. It reared its head at the most unexpected times. Sometimes even when Penyin was trying to cover up. But Kakraba couldn't lie about it, because one way or the other Penyin would find out the truth. "Hm, you have no idea Penyin," Kakraba began, "When I asked him to allow me to feel it, he went crazy. He even accused me of behaving like a witch. Why else would I want to touch his boil, he claimed. So I also went crazy and made hell for him with my insistence, till he decided that to get me off his back, he would have to let me touch it. If you also want to touch it, you will have to act crazy too Penyin, and endure his accusation of you behaving like a witch."

Penyin laughed. "Isn't that too heavy a load to carry just to be allowed to touch a boil?" she joked, "and you are sure it didn't feel like a boil when you touched it?"

"No," Kakraba remained insistent, "It felt like a knot under the skin. I even pressed it."

"You did?" Penyin asked amazed, "No wonder he said you were behaving like a witch. Why? Did you want to kill him? Did he scream in pain?"

Kakraba shook the head. "That was the most odd part. He didn't scream."

"Ao! Ntifer and his ego!" Penyin commented.

"No. It's not his ego problem. He said he honestly felt no pain." Kakraba clarified.

Penyin frowned. "A boil? And he felt no pain?"

"That was what he said," Kakraba persisted, "It was a firm swelling and painless. A boil should have been hurting him even before the formation of pus."

“Well,” Penyin resigned herself, “whatever it is, we shall find out soon. The herbalist will know soon enough.”

“Is your stew not cooked yet?” Kakraba asked Penyin.

“Let me...”

“*Agoo... agoo*, is anyone home?” a voice called from outside.

Kakraba rose to go and see who the visitor was. It was Papa Driver. He was a native who plied his Benz bus between the town and Accra. He often carried messages and parcels to and from Accra on behalf of relations of some of the town’s folks residing in Accra.

“Penyin,” Kakraba called out loud, “It is Papa Driver. Come,” she turned to Papa Driver, “You are welcome. Please come. Have a seat.” She scurried around for a stool for him.

Penyin emerged from the kitchen. “Papa Driver, you are welcome. How is the city and our children? We were even discussing our daughter just some few minutes ago. Ei! It is true what our elders say, that if you mention someone’s name and you hear nothing from the person soon enough, then chances are that something bad has happened to him or her. You are welcome. How is our daughter?”

“Oh, she is fine and pretty as always,” Papa driver assured them.

Kakraba brought him a cup of water. “Straight from the clay cooler pot.” Kakraba remarked as Papa Driver drank with elation, obviously enjoying the water’s unique aroma and taste.

Papa Driver finished the entire cup and said, “When our son visits from the city and my wife serves him such water with the same remark you passed Mena Kakraba, do you know what he tells his mother?”

“I can guess,” Kakraba slipped in.

Papa Driver chuckled and went on, mimicking his son,

“Mother, as for me, I taste sweetness in water only when sugar has been added to it. We city men don’t make out the difference. For us, water is water, whether stored in the clay cooler pot or in the fridge or fetched directly from the tap.”

The women erupted into laughter. They knew Papa Driver’s son and the father mimicked him perfectly.

Papa Driver assumed his own voice again and requested another cup of the water. “I didn’t realize I was so thirsty,” he added.

Kakraba complied instantly, after which she and Penyin welcomed Papa Driver all over again. Then Penyin asked if Ntifor should be summoned.

Papa Driver considered that and said, “I will advise that you let me tell you what your daughter told me first. It is a rather odd message.”

Penyin and Kakraba exchanged troubled looks.

Papa Driver said hurriedly, “Oh, lest I forget, she gave me this for you two.” And handed over two separate folded notes to them.

They thanked Papa Driver simultaneously and almost at the same time proceeded to tie the money into the corners of their cover cloths.

“She wanted to know something in particular,” Papa Driver regained the full attention of the two women. Their heads shot up again as they looked at his face. “She didn’t fully explain to me what exactly she meant. Actually I think that she herself isn’t fully conversant with what she told me. According to her, a prophet or pastor or something...you know how it is these days with these men of these new churches. They bestow all kinds of titles upon themselves. Well, one such person apparently went to a radio station in Accra called Harvest FM. They took him for a mad person initially because he claimed that God had sent him

with a message for your husband and..."

"Ntifor?" the women spoke together, completely befuddled.

"A prophet in Accra? And he knew about our husband Ntifor here?" Penyin wondered.

"Ei! Penyin!" Kakraba came in, a thought occurring to her, "Maybe our husband has a special connection to God and we didn't know about it. Ei! And look at how we bluff him sometimes. Well, as for us, he is just our husband. How could we have known of his special status in God's eyes?"

"Kakraba, you are pre-empting Papa driver's message," Penyin scolded.

Kakraba quickly apologized.

Papa Driver went on, "According to the prophet, God had a message for your husband. And the sign that would confirm his identity was an affliction on one of his legs. So your daughter wanted to know if something has happened to one of your husband's legs?"

When Papa Driver left, the question he had asked had neither been confirmed nor denied, though the women's faces wore looks of shock and anxiety, even fear. Kakraba had wanted to say something, but Penyin had stopped her. Papa Driver was sure that there was something amiss, which Penyin decided, immediately needed to be pondered over before commenting on. Then also, Penyin decided with even more certainty that Ntifor did not need to be summoned and that they would convey the message to him themselves. They needed to break it to him carefully in order not to get him worried, was the reason Penyin gave. Then they begged him to try and avoid their daughter because if she saw him, she would expect him to tell her something, and if Papa Driver had nothing to tell, their daughter would become suspi-

cious and worried.

So for how long should he avoid their daughter, he asked.

The two women conferred, then Penyin said, "We want to get in touch with our son in Takoradi. We will urge him to contact his sister immediately."

Chapter Eleven

ABOUT TWO DECADES ago, an old woman whose grandson was about to get married in a Christian church, started receiving uncomfortable vibes about the forthcoming wedding.

According to the old woman, she must have inherited the gift of premonition from her mother because her mother, when she was still alive, used to also feel that way about things sometimes. The old woman's mother, in her time, however, appeared to have received a better understanding and even appreciation for what she used to feel about things, so much so that when she died, she was proclaimed and revered as a seer. Her name continued to be respected as such.

The old woman however, was not so fortunate. Her gift of premonition was dismissed initially as just the hunch of an old woman. She became both offended and defensive. The thing she sometimes felt was something more than they were describing, she lamented. It was something inexplicable. She started to get on people's nerves. Then one day a grand nephew of hers who was a self-taught, self-ordained and self-proclaimed pastor of a church whose name no one knew, declared that the old woman was a witch. He claimed to have received a revelation to the effect that it was the collective blood of the old woman's victims whom she chewed up in the spirit and whose premature deaths she caused in the physical, that was boiling inside her head. Not many believed the old woman's grand nephew, but it proved so effective in shutting the old woman up, that no one felt the urge to stand

up to the grand nephew and challenge his claims. The old woman, sensing she was entirely on her own, learnt to keep quiet and to keep whatever she felt at any time to herself. However, Idan was her favorite grandson. So when she felt that familiar feeling again upon the announcement of his upcoming marriage, she simply refused to leave the matter. She explained that the vibes she was receiving did not call for Idan's marriage to be cancelled, but she persisted that a dark cloud was looming somewhere, which required the performance of a rite to neutralize its effect. She further explained that it was the family's good ancestors who were goading her on to get her to call upon them and give them the go-ahead to intercede in the spiritual world. The good ancestors had sensed some deeply offended souls among the living and one restless spirit that was hovering around and shedding tears of pain. The offended living souls were not finding peace because of the restless hovering spirit. The old woman asked to be allowed to perform the necessary rites that would communicate the go-ahead to the good ancestors to intercede to clear away the dark clouds. Only then could the spirit be pacified to find its peaceful rest and the offended living souls, given their peace.

The old woman's words unleashed great discomfort in the family. Couldn't she have kept her silly feelings to herself just one more time?

It was the final straw. Her very presence at any place was declared a bad omen. She didn't even need to say anything first. Just her being anywhere was deemed to bring on evil. So she was barred from being anywhere near Idan and his wife-to-be, especially at all their marriage ceremonies.

It was around this time that a middle aged woman called 'Ma' by her children, who lived miles away and was completely unknown

to the old woman, started to suffer a recurring illness. Whenever she got ill, Ma would begin to hear voices inside her head. And they were not of her family's good ancestors.

It was Cora who noticed Ma's decline. Randa was still too young, and Kweku had moved out of the house. As it had always been concluded when Ma's illness resurged, they attributed Ma's extreme quietness and inactivity in the past to her continued grief and pain over Pa's death. But something else had begun to happen to Ma, which Cora never talked about. It was scary. She didn't know or understand what it was to enable her tell it to someone else in a manner that would make sense. Worse still, Ma knew that she could be declared a mad person: she heard a voice. She had heard it only a few times before. The first time that the voice spoke to her inside her head, it sounded inaudible, like a child learning to express sounds. But the more the voice spoke to her inside her head, the clearer and more audible it sounded. And while initially it had sounded bland and without character, it increasingly became unpleasant and impatient, as if it was failing in a cause, and becoming more and more desperate. Then all this stopped, went away, or maybe just lay low, waiting for another time to raise its voice again. Ma was always able to sense when the voice was approaching. It was the controlling power of the voice that always paralyzed Ma into absolute quietness and inactivity. Just waiting to hear it; not knowing when it would first sound inside her head and living with this knowledge alone, knowing no one else could hear what she was hearing, was crippling.

She was in the bedroom and in the same bed she had once shared with Pa and little Randa when the voice sounded inside her head. It wasn't angry. It was venomously bitter. The sheer force of its barging into Ma's head, hurled Ma out of the bed onto her feet and to stand at attention. It had never sounded so loud and

distinct. It ordered her out of the bedroom into the yard. She was alone in the house. Following the orders that the voice was issuing inside her head, Ma surveyed the compound, taking in all the varied and beautiful flowers that were in plentiful bloom. Then she turned like a zombie back into the house and into the kitchen and stood before the drawer containing the assortment of knives. She took an instant liking to the smooth sharp meat slicer. It glowed and sparkled like a Samurai sword. Ma picked it out of the lot, pushed the drawer back in and left the kitchen to go back into the yard with the meat slicer in her hand. Then urged on by the voice, she moved to the first flowerpot, with budding lilies. It had been one of Pa's favorite flowers. They had both loved and been in love with their flowers. Pa used to say that flowers were God's ultimate expression of His divine handiworks. "Everything beautiful must be given the middle name: Flower," he used to say.

Flowers were an essence of their lives.

Ma glanced around with glazed eyes. Then one hand sprang forward and held the purple lily. A purple beauty, royal, graceful, feminine.

Blood!

Ma blinked. Where did that come from?

Blood!

It was the voice. Ma's head began to throb.

Blood!

The knife was in Ma's hand and the voice was screaming blood. The previous day the voice stayed away from inside her head. Sometimes the voice would stay away for a while, and then barge back. Yesterday she used the slicer to chop up the meat for the stew they had for dinner. Today the voice was back. She was holding the purple lily and the voice was...

Blood!

Ma's hand closed around the flower like the head of a fowl about to be slaughtered unto the gods.

"Whoosh!" the voice sounded. "Whack!" it yelled. "Whack!"

Ma's eyes glistened. War broke out inside her head.

"Whack!"

The gleaming sharpness of the meat slicer began to waltz toward the purple lily. Its sparkling edge rested on the stem below the base.

"Slash!"

The knife glided through the stem.

"Slash!"

Ma froze. She stared at the purple lily in her hand, severed from its stem. Blood. Where was the blood? The blood must be somewhere. Ma panicked. She couldn't trace the blood. She whirled around. No blood. She sniffed the air, searching for a scent of the blood. No scent. She began to tremble. She had failed. The voice had ordered for blood. Where was the blood?

Whoosh! Whack! Whoosh! Whack! Search! Blood! Look! Sniff! Blood! Blood! Blood!

One after the other, the blooming flowers fell. Lilies, roses, hibiscus, all, till there were nothing more left to slice off. And still Ma found no blood.

Failed! The blood had escaped. She was slow. The blood was smart. It had gone. But where did it go?

Ma's eyes roved all the flowers severed from their stems. They lay around helplessly, a rainbow carpet of purples and reds and yellows and whites. So many flowers severed and still no blood. Failed.

The voice became enraged. It burst forth inside Ma's head.

"Squeeze! Squeeze out the blood! Squeeze!"

Ma's feet came crushing down on a rose. Then another rose. Then a sunflower and another sunflower and a hibiscus. One foot after the other.

Crush! Crush! Crush!

One after the other the flowers succumbed completely and lay bare on the ground humbled and defeated. Still, no blood.

Failure.

The voice began to taunt. "Failure! Failure! Failure!"

Ma began to wail. She flung away the meat slicer and slumped on the carpet of flowers, not feeling the thorns and continued to wail.

It was in that state that Cora, on her return with her little sister Randa, found Ma.

Flower.

Pa never gave Ma the middle name: Flower.

Miles away, the old woman who had been declared a bad omen and banned from all the marriage ceremonies of her grandson, shuddered as something surged through her. She didn't know exactly what it was, but it was a force of some kind. She wanted to tell somebody about it, but how could she make anyone understand her, that that thing she sometimes felt, had just communicated a message to her about something that had happened somewhere and which was somehow connected to the marriage ceremony she had been banned from? So, the dark clouds remained. The dark clouds she had wanted the good ancestors to have removed. So while Ma wailed over her failure to find the blood, the old woman also shed tears for the grandson who wouldn't listen to her.

Aggie felt as if the old woman, Idan's grandmother, had descended into her home that evening. She felt the old woman's spiritual

presence as if it had penetrated the walls of her home and embedded itself within each and every block of the house. Her head ached with the occupation of thoughts about the old woman as she ate alone at their dining table, a sad and lonely dinner minus the company of her husband. Aggie felt awfully sad and lonely. She had been eating alone a lot of late. Idan was never home early enough to join her for dinner. She was almost always fast asleep by the time he came home from wherever he had been. The few times he had come to find her awake, he had refused to eat for one reason or the other. It wasn't the first time that Aggie suspected infidelity on Idan's part, but in the past, Idan always made it a point to be home in time to have dinner together with her. And he always ate her food. His affairs even became predictable to her. She established the pattern with a small spy job and common sense. Most of the women he cheated on her with were always at the initial stages, full of hope of unseating Aggie as Idan's wife and taking her place. The reason was always their failure to conceive. The secret lover would begin to nurse the hope that if she played her cards well, she could fill Aggie's position soon enough, wear Idan's ring and bear him the child he so desperately desired.

For his part, as soon as Idan noticed his secret lover's line of thinking, he would either do a disappearing act or where apt, employ Plan B. This mainly involved dropping hints about how owing to one reason or the other, much as he would dearly love to, he could never divorce Aggie. It had the effect of sending the secret lover packing herself out of his life, having sensed the zero chance of ever becoming Idan's wife.

Idan was financially comfortable but not so hideously resourced as to adequately maintain a mistress for whom existed no prospect of marriage; so, no cash and no upkeep and no marriage? *Adieu!*

Aggie failed to predict Idan's latest affair and had as yet been unable to also establish its pattern, and that was scary. Randa was different. She appeared not to be giving up or giving Idan cause to do so either.

The most worrying and frightening issue to Aggie now was that feeling of invasion of her whole self again by the old woman's spirit. It was as if Idan's dead grandmother was trying desperately to convey something to her.

She finished her lonely dinner, cleaned up, had a cold shower and retired to bed with a short story which had appeared in one of the weekend papers and which had caught her fascination. It was said to be part of a paper presented by the author at a seminar somewhere. Aggie had never heard of the author before, so it wasn't her name that attracted her to the short story. That weekend newspaper was also not one that she read regularly. Something simply drew her to the newspaper and the story. She had no idea what it was. It was inexplicable. And when she read the short introduction to the story by the editor, she felt an invasion of her body by Idan's dead grandmother the strongest.

'...the occasional crossing of paths of the Christian faith and some traditional sensibilities. Now read on:'

"Akatasia was the pretty daughter of a wealthy Ghanaian entrepreneur who returned home from England where she had been residing, to get married. Akatasia was once quoted as having said that, when she first arrived at London's Victoria station, she thought that all of England was in mourning. And if England was in mourning, then it could only mean the death of a prominent member of the royal family. That was because everyone she saw at the station was in black; black trousers, black skirts, black jackets, black everything. By the time Akatasia returned to Ghana for her marriage years later, Akatasia had been effectively indoctrinated in

the elegance of the colour black in the high echelons of fashion. On the day of her traditional marriage to her husband-to-be, Abrante, Akatasia wore an expensive and fashionable black designer dress. Her grandmother, Aberewa, howled in shock at the sight of Akatasia. It was horrible enough that the dress was way up above Akatasia's knees. Did she have to choose that day of all days to be so outrageously generous with her body curves and feed the hungry and greedy eyes of the many males around with her near nakedness? Thighs exposed to their possible uppermost part and her bosom on such free display? On top of it all in the colour black too? 'Couldn't you have worn something in white which decently covered your thighs and bosom?' Aberewa wailed, but she was laughed at and asked to keep quiet. Akatasia was a modern woman, she was told, a virtual Londoner. And in Europe people wore black dresses even to weddings and outdoorings. It wasn't like Akatasia had donned on a black wedding gown! Was this not just the engagement! The more important church wedding in two weeks time was to be the special de luxe occasion. Aberewa reacted in horror to that assertion. This was just the engagement! The traditional marriage was just the engagement? Since when? Aberewa's horror was not without basis. Aberewa had heard that engagements in Europe often took place solely between the man and the woman intending to marry. Sometimes even at a dinner in a restaurant. The man would bring out the ring from his pocket or wherever, often as a pleasant surprise to the woman and pose the question, 'Will you marry me?' Whereupon if she said yes, he slipped it on her finger and went on to announce to all that they were engaged. Finished. How on earth could that in even the minutest way, be equated with even a fraction, let alone the entire traditional marriage ceremony of Akatasia and Abrante? Their ceremony started at 11:00 am and lasted till 6:00 pm. The house of

Akatasia's parents was filled with family members and friends and even gatecrashers. Akatasia's bride price of a big suitcase, pieces of cloths, headscarves, jewelry, assorted drinks and cash, were proudly presented. Her parents received their token compensation from Abrante for the 'loss' of their daughter to him. Akatasia's brother also got something for the 'loss' of his sister. The week prior to the marriage ceremony, three members of Abrante's family, came and performed the 'knocking ceremony' with the required bottles of Schnapps and a token fee. This was the symbolical knocking on the door of Akatasia's parents to formally seek their permission to be allowed to return the following week to marry Akatasia off to Abrante. How could all that be equated with a ring inside a pocket brought out at a dining table? No wonder Akatasia saw nothing indecent in her hideously revealing black dress. But the gods had seen all the wrongs. Aberewa feared this but kept it to herself because just as she had been shut up about the black dress, so too would she be shut up about this. After which she would be lucky not to be declared a witch. Then the gods reacted. The white wedding scheduled to come on in two weeks, never did. Three days after the traditional marriage that was belittled as just the engagement, a mammy truck loaded with bags of charcoal knocked down and killed Abrante instantly. 'A tragic accident!' wept some. 'Fate!' concluded others. But to minds like Aberewa's, Akatasia had tempted the gods. She had goaded them, so they had given her good reason to wear black."

'...in conclusion the editor asked: should Akatasia have given Aberewa the benefit of the doubt and changed the black dress? Or would that have amounted to Akatasia giving in to primitive superstition just days shy of her de luxe white Christian wedding?'

Aggie read the short story again and again, hoping it would induce sleep. It didn't. So she rose and put off the light and plunged the room into darkness. She lay back on the bed in the dark, staring into nothingness. Sleep continued to elude her. She felt the old woman stronger than ever before, as if she was waiting for the darkness to make her entry. Aggie felt like her whole being was getting consumed. She shuddered. She became scared. She began to fear the night. If only Idan would come home. Maybe today he would come early. Maybe today he would at last break up with Randa: the phantom Randa with a name and no face. Maybe today Idan would come to his senses and decide he didn't want to continue to hurt his wife. Maybe today the phantom Randa would accept that Idan would not leave his wife for her and would say enough was enough. Maybe today the old woman who was... maybe the phantom Randa who was the old...maybe the ...

She drifted. Her heavy breathing slowed gradually and then evened out. Her body rested. Her muscles relaxed. Her heartbeat dawdled, lingering. A purple blossom bloomed in the fertile other world and sprang to life behind her firmly closed eyes. The purple petals of the blossom began to mime and dance to a classical beat. Only ears in the other world where Aggie now was, could hear. The purple petals did some gradual elegant soft leaps forward. Then all came together and closed up, embracing each other to protect their stored secrets. Theirs yet to come. Suddenly a loud rumble sounded. The sun came out with a force. A ray targeted the blossom. It glowed directly upon it. The petals swayed in heated agony, then succumbed to the scorching pressure. Gingerly, it opened up, yielding, submitting till it complied and released its stored secrets. Figures of smoke rose out from its center as if from under the earth. Faces partially shielded by shades of gray. The figures launched into a series of rhythmic steps and movements.

They moaned as if in pain and contorted their cloudy figures on a stage suspended in air. The feet of smoke were denied stepping on earth. Out and out they spilled, each ghost an episode, a reflection, a piece of a facet of her life. Events of the past unfurling and competing with evolving happenings; longings, deep seated wishes, desires too complicated to contemplate. Intimacies stuck in the linings of the heart, anxieties of unlimited proportions. Fears of the yet to come and the still to occur; outgoings; fulfillments. She was a spectator, a passive onlooker, a non-player. Her body stirred and turned on the bed, her flaying arms continually smacking the emptiness beside her; Idan's absence. Even while she was in the other world, his absence felt like pain knotted in a thousand places.

The players released by the purple blossom followed their cues. She knew them. Even the scenes were familiar. One face jutted out from among the others. An old face advanced in age and belonging to the world of the ancestors. The old face melted into a scene and began to enact a part it used to play best before the ancestors summoned her into their midst. A dead old woman up in arms. "We sold our souls the day we turned our backs on our gods and ancestors and embraced theirs for all the wrong reasons!" the old woman moaned, "we are now half-hearted followers of ours and confused followers of theirs; hiding our little doubts; afraid of them getting found out. See?" And shrieked with laughter.

Aggie's body contorted violently on the bed in reaction to the piercing echo of the loud resounding squeal in the mental world. Her left arm rose and fell and hit emptiness where Idan's body should have been.

"Till death you do part?" the old face derided.

Aggie's muscles tightened involuntarily on the bed. She was still in the other world. Her heartbeat gained momentum. Ceaseless

echoes. She was the non-player in the other world. She looked the other way to avoid the old face. Curtains of orange and blue and red ignited, hitting her in the eyes. A glowing flame of fire. The old face applauded wildly. A skeletal hand suddenly dragged the non-player onto the stage suspended in air.

Aggie's physical body writhed on the bed.

In the other world she walked aimlessly about on the stage. Then the old face struck her palms of bones together. The collision shook the stage. The non-player was now a performer. She drifted into the role, playing her own self.

A handful of mosquitoes in the bedroom had a field day. Their victim was like dead. They sank their feathery claws into flesh and veins with glee and feasted voraciously on her blood. Then flew away clumsily, blackened by their supply, to make way for others.

Now a performer playing her own self, the former non-player's right palm caressed the smoothness of the flowing bundle of silk. Her right hand flew to her head to touch the tiara. Then the thunderstorm broke as the pastor smiled down at them. Every face was smiling. The pastor recited, "...do you take this..." Flash! The old face materialized over them; the old face that had been barred. She hung over them and began to issue orders. And on the old face's right hand, another skeleton nodded vigorously to her orders. "...to be your lawfully wedded..." Flash! A gigantic spark tore through the gray clouds, its bright streak of light criss-crossing the skies. The heavens rumbled deeply. A loud cracking sound possessed the air. The old face smiled for the first time. The bride and groom emerged from the church laughing gaily into each other's eyes and strolling arm in arm. Flames sparked; ashes rose up in a whirlwind and transformed into two bulls. The bulls sized each other up; their horns ready to do battle. The bride and the

groom entered their fine car, decorated with purple ribbons.

Suddenly the bride began to sweat. She screamed to be let out of the car but no one heard her. Her husband was smiling at everything and waving at everyone. The car set off. She wanted the car to stop but no one could hear her. No one appeared to even see her. She was sensing something and wanted the car to stop. But a little boy's fate had already been sealed. Six years old and barefooted, he stood and waited meters away, clad only in a faded pair of dark green shorts. In his right hand, he held a catapult with which he had hunted for lizards. He grew excited as the tooting horn of the wedding procession sounded nearer. He began to hop up and down, thrilled and filled with joy. The pouring rain made no impact at all on his high spirits. A glimpse of the beautiful bride and the groom was all that he wanted and his day would be made.

Aggie's body twisted violently on the bed. Sweat poured from her pores, drenching the sheets.

A black hand shot out and brought from a large jute sack a huge black cat. Claws materialized from nowhere and dug into the chest of the black cat. The boy hopped up just as another angry spark tore through the heavens. An inert spirit became enraged. Roused and provoked, it struck without mercy. The boy, up in mid air, embraced the spirit's blow. Drenched in his faded shorts, the muscles of his little frame contracted involuntarily as powerful electric current from the heavens, tore through his body. Abandoned by gravity, he was hurled back up with immense force. His little soul was long gone to his Maker before the atmosphere, rejecting his body, tossed it back down. He hit the flooded ground with a thud the very second that the car decorated with purple ribbons and carrying the bride and the groom drove past where he had stood alive just minutes ago. He lay there in the mud and

apart from a pair of bloodied lips and a ghastly whiteness where his organ of sight had been there was no injury to his body. His Mama was kneading corn dough on the fire in the communal kitchen she shared with her sisters-in-law and humming a tune about a boy whose smile always soothed the tiredness in his Mama's limbs. She had no idea what choice the gods had made out there in the pouring rain. The bride in the car saw what happened and didn't understand why her husband was still smiling and waving at everyone. She sought to frantically gain her husband's attention. The boy in the dark green shorts was dead by the roadside and her husband was still smiling and waving? She began to hit him. She was out of control. She hit him with both fists. She hit and hit and hit and hit!

"What the hell is this all about?" the all too familiar voice of Idan barked into the night.

Aggie shot up with a start to full awakening. Her fists were imprisoned inside Idan's two large hands. She was completely soaked in tears. She frowned, confused. Idan released her hands. He was angry. She had just subjected him to severe blows.

"It was the dream again Idan," Aggie cried, "The boy."

Idan couldn't control his rage. "Do we have to go through it again, something that happened so many years ago? Should we hold ourselves responsible for something that happened on our wedding day? Did we have the power to stop the rain from falling that day? Are we to blame for a boy who sneaked out of the house without his mother's knowledge to the roadside to catch a glimpse of our procession?" he yelled.

"It is not just that Idan!" Aggie cried. "Your grandmother's face showed up again. You know how strongly she felt about this cloud she claimed was hanging over us."

"Over us?" Idan barked cynically, "Over you! She said the

cloud was hanging over you. And didn't we both agree with the rest of the family that the blessing of our marriage in God's sight in church was enough to ward off everything?"

Aggie allowed the tears to flow. "A lot is happening Idan," she moaned.

"Then seek help!" Idan snapped.

"Where Idan? Where?"

Idan got even more furious. "You ask me where? How am I supposed to know? Do I dream and experience your nightmares with you? You should know what to do and where to go. But do something Aggie. Please. See someone. A psychiatrist or spiritualist, who knows. Gosh, maybe an exorcist. But please see someone. The Pope if need be Aggie! Because if you beat me up this way ever again...."

Aggie convulsed in tears.

Idan ignored her and moved to the edge of his side of the bed, far away from her.

Aggie cried like a baby. She had wanted to tell him so much more. About the anonymous letter bearing the one word: NEMESIS and about the perfume that upset her so in the office. What time in the night did Idan come home? She could only recollect the emptiness beside her on the bed.

She stared at his back. He was snoring softly.

She lay there awake, afraid to fall back to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Dina swung the skipping rope forward over her head... hop... backwards under her feet... hop... forward... hop... backwards... hop...

Anyone who was not aware of Dina's daily dawn skipping routine obviously did not know Dina well enough. She was admired for her strict adherence and discipline because rain or shine, Dina skipped. One old aunt however disapproved of Dina's firm and taut body. Dina's failure to contribute her quota to the larger family's crop of a new generation was already a huge disappointment for her. And she regarded Dina's daily exercise routine as absolute nonsense. Dina lacked flesh and fat on her body, she moaned. Dina had no bosom and no buttocks. A languid pole. So where was the fat that Dina kept burning?

A recollection of her aunt's opinion always brought a smile to Dina's lips. The old aunt meant well. She couldn't be blamed.

Dina pumped more zest into the exercise routine. Forward... hop... backward...hop...humming.

Mary had a little...hop...

Its fleece was white as snow

And everywhere that Mary...hop...

The lamb was sure to...stop! A revolt of the conscience.

She stopped skipping, sweating and breathing hard. This hand down rhyme was always creeping in her mind to be hummed. The devouring might of the colonial legacy on minds and psyches. The

lamb with fleece as white as snow taking charge of an exercise routine on grounds upon whose surface no snow had ever fallen. She resumed skipping, tapping more consciously into her store of tunes. Forward...hop...backward...hop...

Yoo ko mli nshi kelewele ye Afrika...hop...

Mli nya bi Mami kaple ke yahe eko...hop...

Be ni mi she dze me le ake eta...hop...

Eta...hop...kelewele eta...Stop!

The rope that was in mid air over her head descended pronto back to earth. Dina growled. This couldn't be anyone who knew her well enough. Anyone who did would not call her at that time of the morning. Whatever the caller had to say had better be worth disrupting her exercise for.

"Afi!" she called aloud.

"I'm in the bathroom Madam," Afi responded.

The telephone buzzed on incessantly.

Dina dropped the rope and ran into the living room. The wall clock showed 5.42 am. She grabbed the receiver and bellowed a "Hello!"

Her anger instantly dissipated at the sound of the voice at the other end. "You?"

"The very me!" Sylv grizzled, "Did I interrupt your workout?"

"Need you ask?" Dina chuckled, "This had better be very important Sylv."

"It is!" Sylv replied, "Pesewa's children are all in. A grand family meeting is scheduled for later this morning. 5th Wife's sister is representing her there. She needs company. Can you and Vickie do her that favor?"

"Did I tell you that Destine thinks someone has been trailing her since our programme with 5th Wife on your show?"

Sylv didn't respond. He bided his time.

Dina gave in. "Okay, let her meet us at Harvest FM. It's safer."

"I agree," Sylv said, "I'll get Muff right now to arrange that. But there is something else.

"I thought as much!" Dina groaned.

"5th Wife's family head is sending a delegation of two elders with a special message to Pesewa's family head!" he went on, laughing, "It's an exclusive to my show."

"Good for you!" Dina blurted.

Sylv laughed. "Are you that upset about my interruption of your exercise routine?" he feigned pain.

"Spare me your cheap acting," Dina quipped.

Sylv chuckled and added seriously, "You and Vickie will be introduced as relatives of 5th Wife."

"And where will 5th Wife be?" Dina asked.

"Wherever it is she has been all this while. None of the four older wives are expected there either. They are also going to be represented." Sylv divulged.

Dina asked what time the meeting was starting.

"11:00 am." Sylv informed her.

Dina growled.

Sylv laughed.

"I'll call Vickie right away," she told him.

"Thanks Dina," he chuckled, "And now you have my permission to go and continue with your workout."

"Too late. It's ruined."

"Can I make it up somehow?"

"Yes."

"Your word is my command. I am all ears for you alone."

"Your tummy."

“What?”

“Do something about it. The litres of beer are beginning to show.”

She hung up laughing before he could have the opportunity to say anything in return.

Some questions are better left unasked, like how the crowd gathered outside Pesewa’s mansion got wind of the grand family meeting. They were curious men and women, some of whom had come there to gossip and pick up what was new about the case. Others were there to admire the throng of wealthy people in their posh cars streaming in and out of the house and dream about how or when they would also own cars like that. But for others, it was business as usual, like the coconut seller with the expensive mobile phone and the once-upon-a-time sugarcane seller, who for either lack of sugarcane or whatever, had today put on the guise of a shoe-shine man. Inside their heads, both men nursed the hope that, today, 5th Wife would show up, so that after the meeting, now that they knew what kind of tricks she could pull, they would successfully trail her to her hideout, inform their boss and collect their money. Their past fiasco, like the time spent trailing that young woman who was on the GMG show with the older woman and 5th Wife, had made their boss very angry. It was both time and money wasted. Today they couldn’t afford to lose.

“They say all his children are now in!” a man in a brown batik shirt revealed.

“Ho! But who doesn’t know that?” a young man leaning against an old and rusty bicycle answered back, “It is the casket you should be talking about. They say it is the first of its kind in the country.”

“How did you know that?” another with a Scooby-do haircut

rebuked, "Were you at the airport when it arrived?"

The rusty bicycle guy retorted, "My brother works with Aviation."

"And does his job entail standing at the airport to check what kinds of caskets are brought in daily?" Scooby-do haircut snapped.

A man in a light blue shirt and wearing a pair of glasses that made him look suspiciously like an investigator, commented sadly, "Oh Ghana! Look at us? Look at all the people in there? The wasted hours; nil productivity; all because of one dead man. And instead of discussing issues of development and progress, look at us, we are rather concerned about the dead man's casket."

A rasta man in a red, yellow and green T-shirt, intoned, "Jah have mercy upon his children, Man! How many decades of independence now?"

No one responded.

"A bloated ego for having successfully booted out the colonial master is all that we have left, Man!" Rasta man went on unperturbed. "A badly crooked ego, Man! Tell me if I am wrong Man! But when was the last time that as the independent country that we are, we coughed and sneezed on our own without an input from a donor country, Man! See how we refer to them too, Man! Donor partners, Man! Partners? The guys are our lords, Man! Bizarre sense of whatever, we have Man! Bizarre!"

Rasta man gained the attention of the man in the light blue shirt. "Every fiscal year we go to them, cup in hand, before we are able to balance our budget. My brother..."

"Peace!" Rasta man wailed.

"Can you point out one single project in this country that was executed without donor input? We go marching on every independence day to commemorate our hard won independence..."

“Jah be blessed!” Rasta man sang.

“And on the same platform, urge our donor partners to give us more. More, my brother! More! Oliver Twisters is what I call us!”

“Jah bless, Man! Jah bless!”

A young woman selling doughnuts in a sieve, whispered into the ear of her friend selling bananas and roasted groundnuts, “The *mpesempese* man, do you think he has done his thing this morning?”

“Ho!” sniped the groundnut seller, “But as for him, is that not his toothpaste?”

A young man in red snapped, “What you girls are doing is called bias.”

It caught the two young women off guard. Not only did they not understand what the big English word that the young man used meant, but also they didn’t mean for any other ear to hear their gossip.

“My sister, let’s get out of here and go sell our food!” the doughnut seller beckoned.

Her friend agreed.

They hurriedly left the scene.

In the huge and luxuriously furnished living room of the Pesewa mansion, the family meeting was under way. The family linguist announced upon the family head’s directive, that the wives should present themselves. 5th Wife’s sister nudged Dina who was seated closest to her. They didn’t get up. They had planned not to. Prior to their departure from Harvest FM to the meeting, 5th Wife’s sister divulged a surprise to them. 5th Wife had been on very good terms with her most senior rival, Pesewa’s first wife. And 1st Wife had apparently taken a decision on behalf of all the

wives, which she had communicated to 5th Wife and which all the wives agreed with.

While Dina, Vickie and 5th Wife's sister remained seated, a woman rose and announced herself as the spokeswoman for all the wives. She was a known close relation of Pesewa's first wife. Her announcement was unexpected by Pesewa's sisters. It took even the family head by surprise.

"Maame, be specific," the linguist cautioned, "Which of the deceased's five wives are you representing here?"

"All five wives, my lord," the woman replied.

The room instantly filled with mumblings of surprise and curiosity. The family head beckoned the linguist's ear to his lips and whispered something to him. The linguist announced what the family head told him. "Maame, since you just said that you are in contact with all five wives, can we conclude then that you are in contact with the 5th Wife too, who to the best of our knowledge, is in hiding?"

The spokeswoman was not surprised. She had apparently expected to be asked that question. "As most of you here probably already know," she began, "I am related directly to only the first wife. Indeed, it was she, in her capacity as the most senior wife, who asked me to represent all the wives here today. So what I am going to say now is what she specifically asked me to relay on behalf of all the five wives to all of you gathered here today. And if we look around this room, we can see that none of the five wives are here in person. So the decision to have me represent them was not a dictatorial one by the first wife alone, but a mutual one of all five of them."

The family head ordered that the spokeswoman be allowed to speak without interruption.

She proceeded, "The four younger rivals of my relative all

have their respective direct relations here representing them in accordance with tradition. So if I say something detrimental about any of them, their representatives here should please reproach me here and now.”

No one spoke. The family head nodded for her to continue.

“My relative, the most senior wife, says that even though she has no idea at all about where her youngest rival is hiding, she feels obliged as the oldest wife, to include her. Her prime concern is the happiness of their late husband’s soul. She is of the conviction that, their late husband would never forgive her if in his death, she should stand by and allow the five of them to be carved up and differentiated. Their late husband loved his youngest wife because she made him happy in ways that maybe the rest of them couldn’t. Moreover, in spite of the obvious very strong hold of 5th Wife over their husband, she was never selfish in sharing him. Indeed, 5th Wife insisted and always ensured that their late husband met his intimate obligation to share his bed with each and every one of them in the fairest possible manner...”

“So what?” Pesewa’s oldest sister shot up from her seat. She was the leader of the group that was pushing for 5th Wife to be married to Pesewa’s brother. “Are we to sit here and allow...”

“Sit down!” the family head ordered directly. He was normally expected to speak through the linguist. To have flouted that norm indicated the level of his displeasure at Pesewa’s sister’s unauthorized interruption.

Pesewa’s sister apologized quickly and sat down at once.

Having duly apologized for her misconduct, Pesewa’s sister was directed to do the right thing and ask permission to speak.

She did.

The spokeswoman was entreated to allow Pesewa’s sister to make her point. She agreed and sat down as Pesewa’s sister rose

to speak. "My lord, that woman..."

"Who?" the linguist made a face.

"My brother's fifth wife."

"Then address her so. As 5th Wife, not as: that woman."

"I am sorry my lord. So as I was saying, 5th Wife does not deserve or qualify to be accorded any recognition as one of my late brother's wives. The family has not set eyes on her since the death of my brother. She has flouted tradition with impunity by failing to subject herself to any widowhood purification rite. It is the purification rite that accords her the recognition as one of the widows. So if she hasn't gone through it, then she is not a widow of my late brother. And if she is not a widow, how can she be accorded that recognition?"

The spokeswoman sought permission to be allowed to respond. This she was granted.

"5th Wife would gladly and willingly go through with the purification rite if only it is one that will ensure the solace and happiness of their late husband's soul," she began. "5th Wife is not coming out of hiding because she is convinced that the intentions of her sisters-in-law is to use the purification rite only as an excuse to maltreat her. She is aware of plans by her sisters-in-law to get one of her late husband's brothers to sleep with her as part of the purification rite and by it, seal the ritual for a levirate union."

"My lord, that is a lie!" Pesewa's sister roared, "5th Wife is peddling lies and false allegations on air. That radio station called Harvest FM has paid her money to do that."

"How do you know?" the linguist warned, "I will ask you to be careful. If you have no proof of the radio station having paid 5th Wife any money, they can take you on. Your careless words can bring this whole family into disrepute. I suggest that you sit down and allow this meeting to proceed."

Pesewa's sister slumped down on her seat in protest.

The linguist resumed the proceedings. "Are the children represented?" he asked.

They were. So too were Pesewa's other siblings and the larger family since it was the first meeting with all the children and family members. Even though everyone gathered there knew the reason, as custom demanded, the purpose of the meeting was reiterated.

The linguist spoke. "We are gathered here in response to a piece of sad news that reached our ears, that our dear son Pesewa, retired to bed one night and failed to wake up the following morning. Are his remains still in good condition at the mortuary?"

The eldest son, who had flown in from Europe, assured the family head on behalf of the children into whose hands that responsibility was entrusted, that they were.

"Are you sure?" the linguist asked the oldest son. And turning to the larger family present, added, "Do you recall that a newspaper reported not too long ago that some mortuaries were packing the corpses like sardines inside their fridges? And that power fluctuations had caused the corpses in another mortuary to go so bad that the affected families had been compelled to bury their loved ones like fowls?" And turning his attention back to the oldest son, repeated, "Are you sure that the conditions where our beloved son is being preserved is worthy of his status?"

Again, the oldest son assured the family that everything was fine in that respect.

"What of his transitional home and final resting place?" the linguist further inquired from the eldest son. That responsibility was also the children's.

"The transitional home is ready," the oldest son said of the casket, "I brought it with me from England."

Murmurs of contentment filled the room.

“And the final resting place?” the linguist asked concerning the grave.

“We are still working on that one,” the eldest son replied.

The family head was not too pleased with that response. He summoned the linguist and relayed a message through him, which the linguist then relayed to the eldest son. “Are you children conscious of your late father’s status in society before his death? Are you aware of the caliber of people who will attend the funeral and be by the graveside to witness the quality of your father’s final resting place? Are you getting the message?”

The eldest son rose. “Linguist, please let it reach the ears of the family head that just as we did with our choice of the casket, so too are we doing with the grave. We are not sparing any cedi or pound or euro. The grave is being tiled. We chose cream tiles with gold trimmings. We bought them in Spain.”

“What is all this nonsense?” thought a young public servant, a relation of the extended family. From his calculation, the casket alone was about the equivalent of his salary for three whole years. He had attended the meeting just out of curiosity and had come together with the man in the light blue shirt who was outside with the crowd at the gate and who was not allowed in. He was so overwhelmed with annoyance at what to him was senseless spending on a dead man, that he made ready to leave the meeting.

A two-man delegation dispatched by 5th Wife’s family head had the linguist reminded of their presence. The linguist introduced them to the gathering and apologized for the delay in calling them to the floor. The linguist explained to the gathering that the two men were there with a message from the head of 5th Wife’s family to which they also belonged.

All eyes turned to them.

Seeing the eagerness with which many wanted to hear them, the Pesewa family head signaled the linguist to invite 5th Wife's family head's delegation to the floor. The two men rose gingerly. They were conscious of the intense scrutiny, especially by Pesewa's sister.

The older of the two men adjusted his cloth, faced the Pesewa family head and addressed him directly. "The words I speak and utter here are from the lips of my family head who speaks on behalf of the entire clan of your late honourable son's fifth wife," he began.

The room went dead quiet. The older man had everyone's complete attention.

"I am overwhelmed and filled with great appreciation for the stance that our daughter's oldest rival, the deceased man's first wife took with regard to the need to please the soul of their late husband. We as a clan are also concerned about his soul. Our lineage and clan believe that the physical death of a person is only the first death. A person's whole and complete being is his body, his spirit and his soul. The first death, we believe, is the separation of the body from the spirit and the soul. After that, there is the second death. That, we believe, is the separation of the spirit and the soul." He paused.

Pesewa's eldest sister frowned and whispered to another sister close to her, "What is he on about with all this long talk?"

As if the older man heard her, he fixed her a stern stare before turning his head to focus once again on the family head, who was actually also beginning to wonder what was going to come next.

The older man didn't keep them waiting for too long.

"Our lineage and clan believe that a person's spirit after his death, is the remnant of his mind. Also, that as I stand before you

now and speak, our daughter's late husband's spirit is still bonded with his soul and is hovering around believing that our daughter, his fifth wife, infected him with the AIDS virus."

Pesewa's eldest sister shot up from her seat in protest.

"Sit!" the family head ordered tensely without turning his head from the face of the older man. For the second time the oldest sister had provoked the family head to speak directly to her.

As she sat down, the other sister sitting close to her whispered, "If you do it a third time, they will demand that you slaughter a sheep."

The air inside the room became tense and heavy. The young public servant who left the meeting to join his friend outside the gate was meanwhile feverishly dishing out the details he had heard about the casket and the cream tiles with gold trimmings.

The family head beckoned the linguist, cutting short the older man who was about to resume his talk. The linguist apologized to the older man and sought his permission to relay what the family head had just said to the gathering.

"We gathered here, are all family members," he began, "so we need not pretend about how our son and brother and father died. Let us allow the messenger of 5th Wife's family head to proceed without further interruptions."

No one objected.

The older man resumed his talk. "We wouldn't be here on this mission had the notion that it was our daughter who infected him, not existed. If it was our daughter who infected him, then we would have accepted it, and she would have had to live with the consequences of her actions. But she didn't infect him, and to have it concluded that because she was the youngest wife and outgoing in nature, she was automatically the one who went sleeping around with other men, became infected and transferred

it to her husband is just as criminal as the stigmatization of AIDS victims which was what drove your son to end his own life.

“As you may have already heard, our daughter had tested negative but has subjected herself to more tests to satisfy herself and everyone else. Your late son’s faithfulness to his wives was no secret. And that is where the biggest fear and worry of our clan lie. On the eve of his death, your son visited his wife, our daughter. He knew then that it was his final visit to her. She of course didn’t know. But the words he spoke worried her. And only after he took his life did our daughter fully comprehend their underlying message. Your son died believing that our daughter had infected him. He loved her, but he died believing our daughter had been unfaithful to him. He tried to let her know that while he wasn’t demanding her confession, he had forgiven her because he understood the reasons for her unfaithfulness. She was young and had also to share him with four other women. But our daughter didn’t require his forgiveness for something she wasn’t guilty of in the first place.

“The clan sought answers from the ancestors. We poured libation and offered sacrifices. And it was revealed to us that your son died thinking that he and our daughter were the only ones carrying the AIDS virus. He ended his life with the expectation that sooner or later, our daughter would also die from the disease and join him. He didn’t want her to die before him. He wanted to take the lead and wait for her in the ancestral world. He wanted to be in charge in death as he was in life; her guide and protector. That was how dearly your son loved our daughter. Therefore, we would have preferred to leave the matter alone, but for the manner of your son’s death. By committing suicide, he forced the separation of his body from his soul and spirit, which is of absolute importance to our clan. We believe that the second death

occurs only after the burial of the body, in relation to which we have an earnest request.”

He paused for effect.

The linguist of Pesewa’s family head asked the older man if he wanted some water to drink. He had spoken for so long.

The older man declined politely. He would finish with what he had to say and then he would drink the water, he added.

“During the performance of the final rites and prior to when your son’s body is placed inside his transitional home, our clan entreats you to tell your son the truth that it was not our daughter who infected him with the AIDS virus,” he resumed talking, “we have to ask you to do it because only you can. Every tribe and clan has its own ways of communicating specific truths to its dead. So we have to rely on you. Please do it for the sake of our lineage and clan. Please!” He paused heavily.

“I’m done, your lord,” he added. It was almost a whisper. Then he turned to the linguist and said, “Now can I have my glass of water please?”

The room remained deathly quiet as he was served his water, a silence so pervasive that the sound of the water travelling down his throat reverberated throughout the room. Even Pesewa’s eldest sister was struck completely dumb. He finished drinking the water. The empty glass was taken away from him. He went back to his seat. The room remained tense. The linguist consulted the family head, and then took the center stage again. Pesewa’s eldest sister’s heart somersaulted inside her chest. The linguist cleared his throat.

“Every lineage and clan has as many peculiar customs and beliefs as there are those that are common to all ethnic groups and clans,” he began. Then turning to the older man, added, “Without prejudice to the marriage of your daughter and our son, this was

one of the reasons why our elders preferred marriages within tribes rather than between tribes.”

The older man betrayed no reaction on his face.

Pesewa's oldest sister smiled for the first time.

The linguist went on. “You demand of us that we allow you to communicate a specific truth to our son?”

“We do!” the older man nodded.

“What truth?” the linguist asked loudly.

Pesewa's eldest sister chuckled so loud that she attracted a stern stare from the family head.

The older man rose. He was unperturbed.

“There are good souls and bad vengeful souls. Does your lineage believe in that?” he asked.

“We do!” the linguist admitted.

“Then I'll explain the basis of our belief,” the older man proceeded. “The spirit of your dead son, while his body remain unburied, is still embodied with his soul. And it is his spirit that will receive the message of the truth and will manifest it in the soul. That is why we pour libation onto the spirits and not onto the soul. And we the living, communicate with the spirits through rituals and sacrifices. Now back to our concern, which is the clan's worry: if the second death of your son were to occur before the truth is communicated to his spirit, the opportunity for the spirit to make manifest the truth in the soul, will be lost. We believe that the soul normally takes on the character of the body it once inhabited. So the soul of a good person would normally end up being good after the person's death and vice-versa. But this usually normal transition is disrupted when the good person stripped his spirit and his soul of their habitat, which is the body, in a violent and unnatural way such as in a suicide. We have already acknowledged your son's love and affection for our daughter and what he

perceived to be the truth with which he went to his death. Now if I may ask: does your lineage and clan believe that every new born child brings with it the soul of an ancestor?"

"We do," the linguist replied.

"Then I believe that you will understand our fear that your son's spirit may become offended due to his disappointment about the failure of our daughter's spirit to join him in the ancestral world soon. In reaction, his soul may turn vengeful, especially because of the manner of his death. Having mixed their blood through sex when he was alive, his vengeful soul can cross into our ancestral lineage and enter the womb of a woman with child of our tribal lineage or clan just to be born into our clan to cause us pain and havoc."

"Nonsense!" Pesewa's eldest sister hissed under her breath, "Utter nonsense!"

"Is that the true fear of your clan?" the linguist asked the older man.

"It is!" he replied.

The family head beckoned the linguist to move back; an indication that he wanted to speak directly to the older man.

The older man became more alert.

The family head said, "Then we shall respect your fear. Go and tell your family head that I uttered these words directly from my own lips. Tell him that I said the truth will be established and communicated to the spirit of our son before he is laid inside his transitional home."

Meanwhile, the public servant who had left the meeting to join his friend in the light blue shirt outside the gate, had caused a furore with revelations about the discussions inside.

"Tiles with gold trimmings? A casket with an adjustable lin-

ing? Is this Ghana? The same country supported every year with taxpayers' money from Europe and America?" batik shirt yelled.

"Why not?" Scooby-do haircut retorted, "Why should any expense for his funeral be spared? He worked hard for his money. Didn't the papers say he started off as a farm hand and worked his way up? So why should he be held to ransom for his country's reliance on donor partners to balance our budgets?"

"Yeah man!" Rasta man wailed, "that one I agree with you. Cry foul about the casket and gold rimmed tiles, then cry foul also about the four wheel drives and Mercedes Benz cars on our dusty untarred roads, Man!"

"Yes my brother..."

"Peace!" Rasta man exhorted.

"I am unemployed at the moment and should be upset about so much being spent on a dead man," Scooby-do haircut went on, "but fair is fair. We should vent our anger on the unfair world trade conditions and on our own corrupt power men."

"You are right my brother," light blue shirt came in.

"Peace!" Rasta man interjected, responding to any mention of 'Brother' whether he was the addressee or not.

Light blue shirt ignored him and went on, "Get rid of the corrupt power men and more than half of our headaches is cured. We beg for funds from the donors and sign up huge loans from the World Bank in the name of the country with one hand then stretch the other hand all the way to Switzerland to stash it away in our secret bank accounts."

"Yeah man!" Rasta man sang, "And do you think the Swiss are so benevolent that they allow all the cash stolen from Mama Africa and placed in their care sit there idle in the bank vaults waiting to be greeted every morning by their President? Nah! Man! They make the monies work for them while they sit back

cool and watch. Then they recoup the clean money that the voluntarily enslaved stolen money produced from its labour and generously make a fine and pompous show, donating a little percentage of it to poor Africa. Recycled money man! That is the catch. Dirty money scrubbed clean and handed back to Africa to great fanfare!”

“And praise songs from our own power men!” light blue shirt added.

“Yes,” began Scooby-do finally, “so let’s leave Pesewa’s funeral alone. He worked for his money. We must direct our rage at the power drunkards with money they didn’t work for. We came here to feed our curious eyes. Let’s get them satisfied and return to our homes to think of ourselves. Tomorrow too is another day.”

“Yeah Man!”

Chapter Thirteen

WHILE SYLV WAS calling and disrupting Dina's workout about Pesewa's family meeting, Idan got into his car to begin a two-hour journey to his hometown to see his mother,

Not much was exchanged between him and Aggie about why he had to go and see Sisi. Idan evidently didn't want to talk about it. Aggie sensed that and thought it best not to press the matter.

Sisi was not expecting Idan either, which was a rarity. Most of the time, whenever Idan showed up at his mother's home, Sisi would be ready and waiting for him because she knew he was coming. So when her nine-year-old hunchbacked grand-daughter sprang excitedly across the compound toward the house shouting, "Sisi! Sisi! Uncle Idan has come! Uncle Idan has come!" it took Sisi completely by surprise. She emerged from the room onto the veranda with mixed feelings just as Idan reached the short steps of the house. But she managed a smile for him, which, however, failed to conceal the anxiety in her eyes.

"We were expecting you next Saturday, son," she began, "Was it not next Saturday that you were due to come? Shouldn't you have been in the office today?"

"Yes," Idan smiled awkwardly, "But I had to come and see you sooner, Sisi. It couldn't wait till next Saturday."

Sisi's heart missed a beat. "Son, is everything all right with you? Are you sick? Are you in some kind of trouble?" she asked worriedly.

Idan smiled again. "I am not sick Sisi," he assured his mother,

“But everything is not all right. We must talk. I need to discuss something with you. Is Efe in?”

Efe was Idan’s eldest sister. She had left her marital home and moved back in with Sisi after the birth of her fourth child, the hunchback. Her first child, also a daughter, had been born with severe mental handicap. But her second and third, both boys, were born perfectly normal. Efe’s in-laws were quick with their conclusions. How could anyone expect them to accept it as mere coincidence that the two daughters were born as they were? It had to be Sisi. After all, was not Sisi’s grandmother said to be a seer in her time? That would probably have qualified her as a witch even in those days? And was Sisi’s mother not declared a bad omen and barred from her own grandson’s marriage ceremonies? It was in the family. Sisi was a witch who wanted to transfer the witchcraft to her two granddaughters, they argued. No male in their family had been declared a wizard so it had to be the females who inherit it. The two granddaughters had refused the witchcraft for which reason Sisi had made them pay with their respective retardation and deformity.

Efe’s husband initially ignored the claims of his family. Then an aunt of his made an unusual move. She proclaimed herself a witch seeking exorcism and announced that indeed, she and Sisi belonged to the same worship group in the underworld of witches. She revealed that Sisi had been ordered by the underworld queen to transfer her witchcraft to Efe and direct Efe to use it to destroy her husband and his family. Efe’s husband loved his wife and thought that if Efe stayed away from Sisi, the alleged transfer of the witchcraft would be made impossible. He forbade Efe from having anything to do with Sisi again.

“You forbid me to see my own mother ever again?” Efe shrieked at him, “Have nothing to do with her? If my mother

had not carried me for nine months in her womb and given birth to me and raised me to the point where you saw me and fell in love with me, would you have been blessed with the two healthy boys I gave birth to?"

Her husband refused to budge. Their mentally ill daughter was in an institution. Efe packed her things one morning after her husband had left for work and returned home to Sisi with her two sons and their daughter the hunchback. Her husband hit the roof on his return. He threatened to cut off all links with Efe and the children. Efe deliberated over the consequences. The boys were very close to their father. She returned them to him and stayed on at Sisi's with her daughter. Their marriage had not been dissolved. Attempts were still being made to get them back together again, but so far without success.

Sisi informed Idan that Efe was getting ready to go to her shop at the market mall. "I think I will ask her not to leave yet," she added.

"I think you should," Idan replied.

Efe owned a big shop where she traded in plastic-ware like buckets, bowls, trays, laundry pegs and every conceivable household item in plastic. She responded to Sisi's call and joined them on the veranda. Efe's daughter brought them seats and returned to the room to fetch Idan a glass of water.

"How is she doing in school?" Idan asked Efe about his niece.

"Oh, that girl is as strong-willed as steel." Sisi burst in, "she wants to become a lawyer one day."

"And with her entire nine years, she is already aware of private law practice," Efe came in. "Her ultimate dream is to have her own law firm..."

"Whew!" Idan was impressed.

“Which will employ only qualified physically impaired persons.”

“Reverse discrimination?” Idan cocked a brow.

“Can you blame her? They tease her a lot at school,” Efe revealed, “They call her very nasty names.”

“And do you know what she does in return?” Sisi cut in, “She will study the person teasing her closely, spot an imperfection, then coin an equally nasty expression for that person.”

“And when she finds no obvious imperfection, she creates one!” Efe added laughing. “She did that to one very nasty girl. She insisted that one of her tormentor’s nostrils was bigger than the other. And this was a girl with perfect nostrils, Idan, perfect. Yet your niece insisted that one was bigger and nicknamed her ‘Seesaw’. And before anyone could next blink the eye, everyone was calling the poor girl seesaw and claiming they too were seeing the difference in the sizes of the girl’s nostrils.

They all convulsed with laughter.

“That’s my niece!” Idan proclaimed proudly as Efe’s daughter served him his glass of water.

Sisi looked on proudly. “Who is perfect in this world anyway?” she muttered to no one in particular.

“People are born with very big heads or extraordinary tiny sunken eyes. She happened to be born with her spine curved outward. So what?”

Idan finished his water and gave the empty glass back to his niece. Efe’s daughter disappeared back inside the house with it.

A moment of uncomfortable silence elapsed. Laughter time was over. It was time to find out why Idan had arrived.

Sisi cleared her throat. “Well, son,” she began, “like they say, even when we know, we still ask to be sure. How much more when we don’t know? As for us, by the grace of God, we are all

doing fine. We were expecting you next Saturday, and then today you showed up unexpectedly. If you are ready to talk, your sister and I are also ready to listen.”

Idan sighed heavily, mumbled incoherently like one having some difficulty submitting to a confession and then blurted out, “Sisi, I have gotten a woman in the family way. I have made someone pregnant and she is not my wife.”

The sound of a pin dropping would have sounded like a clang in the silence that ensued. It hung suspended like a dagger.

Sisi recovered first. “Son, I wish the last bit was not as it is, but it is, is it not?”

Idan nodded.

“Does Aggie know?”

Idan shook his head.

“Have you considered telling her?”

Idan nodded.

“When?”

“That must be why he is here, Sisi,” Efe came in.

Sisi sighed. “Who is she?” she asked.

“She is a very young woman,” Idan stuttered. “She is still in school, Sisi.”

“Oh God! Idan!” Sisi cried, “So are her parents suing you. Is that why you came? Oh Idan! So many beautiful young women around, free and unattached and lonely, and you went in for a ...how far under age is she? Junior Secondary school? Oh Idan...what have you...”

“Sisi,” Idan shouted, recovering in time from the initial confusion about Sisi’s hasty conclusion, “It isn’t what you are thinking. She is not under age. She is a student at the university.”

Sisi’s sigh of relief could have lifted a hot air balloon. “A student at the university?”

“Yes.”

“Ah Idan, why didn’t you say that earlier. You nearly gave me a heart attack. She must be mature then, if she is in the university.”

“She is, Sisi,” Idan chuckled.

“Can I say something?” Efe came in.

Idan and Sisi turned to her.

“Idan,” Efe began, “a lot would depend, not only on when you break the news to your wife, but how. The two of you have been trying unsuccessfully to conceive a child. If you ask me, the bigger problem is not the when and how you tell your wife but ensuring that the young woman keeps the pregnancy, being the student that she is.”

Idan’s whole body jerked up. The thought that the woman carrying his baby may want to terminate the pregnancy had not occurred to him at all. He shuddered.

Efe went on. “I am also a woman, Idan. Initially, Aggie will be hurt and upset. But she will eventually have to understand and accept it that this may be your only opportunity to become a father. With the gray sprouting on your heads, the chance of Aggie ever conceiving a child dims with each new day. Unless you two are Abraham and Sarah reincarnated, that is.”

This other perspective thrown in by Efe transformed the atmosphere for the better. She had successfully shifted emphasis from the effect of the situation on Aggie and their marriage to the prospective joy of fatherhood for Idan.”

Sisi’s focus also changed gear. Her initial worry about the pain that the news would cause Aggie gave way to a fear of how the one chance of her son becoming a father lay in the hands of this young, university, lady student.

“Being a university student, the probability that she wouldn’t

want to keep the pregnancy is greater, no?" she worried, "When is she due to complete her studies?" she asked.

"She has about another two years more to go, Sisi," Idan replied.

Sisi flung her arms in the air with exasperation. "Oh! That worries me!" she wailed, "That worries me deeply. We must see how best to ensure that she doesn't terminate the pregnancy, does she know you are married?"

"Yes. I didn't hide it from her. I never hide that," Idan confessed.

"Good!" Sisi was pleased. "Does she also know that your wife is unable to conceive a child?"

Idan considered that briefly, "If she does..." he began, "...I mean I never told her."

Efe laughed. "The world is a small place, Idan. She might know more about you and your wife than you probably imagined."

"I agree," Sisi said.

Idan studied his mother and sister. "Are you two implying something? Do you think she found out about Aggie and me and deliberately...oh no! No, I don't think so." But his mind wandered back to their first encounter. It was a coincidence. He had knocked her down...well, almost. And they got back together again because of the crazy woman in the blond Afro wig. Had the crazy woman not pursued her to her hall of residence, she would probably never have gotten in touch with him again. They would never have planned that take-out from Oxford Street and then they would not have ended up in that hotel room. Unless of course...wait a minute. What if the crazy woman never really showed up at her door in her hall of residence? Then the whole drama was a ploy to deepen and cement his sympathy, which seemed inevitably set to quickly transform into intense attraction. The protector syn-

drome. She was pretty. That day he almost knocked her down; she appeared to have taken pains to groom herself well. Her hair had looked exquisitely fresh, as if she had just emerged from a salon; hair, which was the crown of a woman's beauty. Had she taken pains to look good for when he would knock her down? Or was it, when she would let herself be knocked down?"

"Idan!" Efe shouted.

Idan came to.

"Where did you wander to? What were you thinking about?"

Idan chuckled. "Our first encounter; the young woman and I. It appeared to have been destined." And in his head added, "Or very well planned and executed."

Sisi was also day dreaming about the prospect of holding her son's first child. "Did I ever tell you that I did some serious fasting and praying about the failure of your wife to give me a grandchild?" she asked Idan.

Idan's heart churned. Was their inability to have a child really Aggie's fault alone?

"My prayers must have reached God's ears," Sisi went on, completely carried away.

Idan asked lamely, "You did? You fasted and prayed?"

"Yes son, yes!" And resumed her daydreaming.

Idan thought God's answer to Sisi's prayers odd. God used Aggie's pain and his infidelity and unfaithfulness to answer Sisi's prayers? His secret rendezvous with his lover in hotel and motel rooms was God's show of mercy to his mother's cries for a grandchild from him?

"You know," Sisi resumed, "That first time years ago, when you came and informed me that your wife's doctor wanted you to also have some tests done on you to determine if you were the

cause of her inability to conceive, my soul mourned.”

Idan keyed up.

“Do you know how troubling it is for a mother to have it impugned that her son was not a complete man?”

Aggie’s face registered on Idan’s mind. “That wasn’t how I viewed it, Sisi,” Idan countered, “an incomplete man is one who is unable to have intercourse at all.”

“Whatever!” Sisi dismissed it, “The important thing is that you have successfully impregnated a woman.”

The full force of it hit Idan. A smile registered on his lips. Maybe it wasn’t so bad after all, he considered. Aggie was going to have to accept it, that it was her womb that was to blame after all. She would have to accept his baby. HIS BABY! It smelt, felt and tasted good on all of his senses. A child! A baby! His baby!

Poor Aggie! But hadn’t he stuck with her all this while? Other men would have taken on a secret wife by now, so Aggie had better stick it out with him.

“I hope she doesn’t even consider the probability of termination,” Idan blurted. “She must keep it, Sisi. I’ll die if she doesn’t. She must bear me my child, Sisi. God she must!”

Back in Accra, Aggie made to leave home for the office. A ball of force comprising fear and suspicion and something else that she couldn’t quite lay a finger on, pounded furiously against the inner walls of her head.

It was the very moment that, miles away, Idan felt the first true warmth of the prospect of fatherhood seep through his body and infect him.

Efe felt her brother’s joy. “Sisi,” she called, “I think Idan should bring the girl home. We must meet her. She must know how

much this baby means to us. Idan, what is her name? You haven't told us her name."

"Randa," Idan sang.

Efe smiled at Sisi.

Sisi smiled back at her.

"I like her already," Efe relished, "A fine name; fine and uncommon. Randa. Idan, bring her home."

"Yes," Sisi agreed, "Son, go and bring Randa home."

The pounding inside Aggie's head was replaced by Idan's presence; ominous and omnipotent. She also knew she would be in the office alone with Destine. Dina had informed her the previous day about the meeting she would be attending with Vickie and 5th Wife's sister at the Pesewa mansion. The prospect aggravated the sinister and absolute force of Idan's occupancy of her being. It didn't make sense. Destine had stopped wearing the perfume that used to upset her, so ordinarily, everything should be fine, yet there was that gnawing feeling and the force of Idan inside her head when she considered Destine in her thoughts. Weird.

The mysterious anonymous one word note was still not resolved. No further notes arrived for her. The recurrent nightmare about their wedding day had also stayed away. But a strange prophet had gone to Harvest FM and claimed to Sylv, that her father had an affliction on his leg. And after the visit of Papa Driver to her parents, her brother called her from Takoradi to confirm that indeed, their father had developed a strange swelling on one of his legs. How could she dismiss all of this as mere coincidence?

"Auntie Aggie," Destine cut into her thoughts.

Aggie turned.

"I was browsing through this case file and..."

"Which one?" Aggie asked.

“Esi Attah...”

“Oh! That one!” Aggie remarked.

Destine frowned. The notes had not been properly compiled in the file. They were sketches and comments on loose leaves. But Destine was able to make out the essence of the case. And to her mind, it was a critical case.”

“Has MUTE abandoned it?” she asked.

“Oh no! It has just been sort of suspended. A dicey one. There is a threat of a legal action hanging on our heads over it. But now that we have Budu and Stiles on our side, we will resume full work on it soon.”

Destine became more curious. “How does MUTE come across cases like this? How did MUTE become involved with this one?” she asked.

“Through me.” Aggie replied.

“You? How?” Destine pressed.

“I went to visit my parents some time ago...I’ll have to go again soon. I hear my father has a swelling on one leg, a boil or something...anyway, so I was home at my parents one dawn when...”

“Doesn’t whatever is happening to your father require your urgent attention?” Destine interjected.

“Me?” Aggie was startled, “Well my attention would be welcome but the man has enough of it from his two wives. My brother in Takoradi is going to see him this weekend, so I can wait, though I doubt he will succeed in getting him to the hospital. My father prefers herbal and traditional treatments. My brother wants to make sure it is not a pressing hospital case. Father will go to hospital only when he has absolutely no other choice.”

“And you?” Destine probed, “When will you go?”

“Oh, I’ll find time but not now. My brother has been granted

some days off work. With our present situation here at MUTE, time is tight. And it is always too much of a headache when I show up at home anyway.”

“Your parents?”

“No. The extended family. Someone always comes seeking something. They will show up at dawn pretending to come and welcome you. Before you know, they are telling you about seeking your help to secure a job in the city for their son who just completed school. And by completed school they mean Junior Secondary School. And they always want an office job, preferably with the public service. They call it government job. They don’t understand it when you try to explain to them how university graduates are also out on the streets without jobs.”

Destine directed Aggie back to Esi Attah. “So Esi Attah also came looking for you to beg you to find office work for her son?” Destine asked.

“No. She didn’t come herself. And it wasn’t about any son of hers. It was a sister of hers.”

“Esi Attah’s sister?”

“Yes. She came to see me on behalf of Esi Attah. She was so scared of being found out she had come to me. Initially, I thought she was even coming to seek financial help. Many do.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. They see you coming from the city and they think you brought along the whole of Bank of Ghana with you. But Esi Attah’s sister sensed my suspicion and quickly assured me that she hadn’t come to ask me for money. She gained my full attention when she asked me if it was true that I worked for an organization in the city that could assist a woman in trouble.”

“She had done her homework!” Destine remarked.

“Yes. She spoke very quickly, wanting to finish and leave. She

told me how I could locate Esi Attah in the next village. She briefed me that Esi Attah had given birth eight times to..."

"Nine. It said nine children in a note in the file," Destine corrected.

"Yes," Aggie agreed, "One birth was a set of twins."

"I see."

"You read the file well," Aggie commented.

"It interested me deeply. I could use parts of it for my thesis one day," Destine explained.

"Then this should interest you the more. According to her sister, Esi Attah was carrying another child. And the sister's worry was that, the woman with the white car had come to book that one too," Aggie disclosed.

Destine wasn't shocked. "I read about that too in the file. What did she mean?" she asked.

"We are yet to establish that," Aggie replied.

"And the woman with the white car?"

"No idea yet. But I went to see Esi Attah."

"That is also noted in the file. Why?"

"Her sister. She fervently implored me, before she scurried off that day, to go and see Esi. She said that Esi Attah and her husband belonged to a religious sect. She suspected that the woman with the white car, in conjunction with others, were manipulating the likes of Esi Attah and her husband through the sect."

Destine's interest grew. "How did you find them: Esi Attah and her husband, when you went to see them?"

"Esi Attah was completely subservient to her husband," Aggie revealed, "I think even scared. He didn't take kindly to my presence at all."

"Weren't they curious about how you came to them?" Destine asked.

“I dealt with that with the lie that an anonymous caller to my office in Accra mentioned them in connection with a certain woman with a white car.”

“You did?”

“Yes. And as soon as I said that the husband became very angry and aggressive. He ordered Esi Attah to go inside the room. We were seated under a tree outside. Esi Attah hesitated. She obviously wanted to remain, but her husband glowered: ‘I said go into the room!’”

“Oh God!”

“Esi Attah cringed and hurried off. It was weird. Then he faced me with a very hostile stare, cleared his throat and spat right at my feet. It was a deliberate provocation. But I held myself in check. Then he boomed at me: ‘Get up and go!’ I ran off like a rat.” She burst into laughter at the recollection.

Destine laughed too. “And the legal threat?” she asked.

“That came after Sylv mentioned the incident on his GMG show. When we resume work on it, that might be one way to get some information.” Aggie stated.

“The public response?” Destine asked.

“Yes. About the sect and hopefully the mysterious woman with the white car. But the threat came from someone who claimed to be speaking on behalf of the sect.”

Destine asked unexpectedly, “Could they be behind it?”

Aggie frowned. “What?”

“The sect. Could they be behind it?” Destine repeated.

“Behind what?” Aggie was confused.

“The note you received. That NEMESIS note.”

Aggie gasped.

“Didn’t that ever occur to you?” Destine asked her.

Aggie stuttered and failed to say what she had in mind.

Destine said, “I did some reading on it: Esi Attah and her hus-

band's sect, it's a religious one, no?"

Aggie nodded heavily and muttered, "What did you find out, Destine?"

Destine put down the pen in her hand and closed the Esi Attah case file. It was as if she was about to embark on a new critical mission. "Nemesis was a minor goddess in Greek mythology who personified the spirit of vengeance. She ensured that no criminal or wrongdoers escaped punishment!" she stated calmly.

Aggie fiddled restlessly.

Destine observed her keenly.

Aggie's head began to spin. A spirit of vengeance? "I have been having a strange recurring dream," she divulged suddenly to Destine, "It evolves around my wedding day. It rained heavily even though the weatherman predicted a sunny day. There is always a black cat present. And blood."

Destine growled. "Did someone die on your wedding day?" she asked anxiously.

Aggie cast her a deeply troubled look. "Are you into superstitions?" she asked Destine.

Destine chuckled. "Oh Auntie Aggie, do you have to be superstitious to know that the presence of a black cat and blood signify death?"

Aggie smiled nervously, as if her lips belonged to another face. She was still considering what to say next when Destine retorted, "My sister was not so lucky."

"Your sister?" Aggie managed, "Did she also dream about black cats and blood?"

Destine chortled. "Oh Auntie Aggie, no. I meant that she didn't even get lucky with a rainy wedding day. She got no wedding at all. The prospective husband left her sitting before it even got to that."

“Oh no! Why?” Aggie cried, empathizing with Destine’s unknown sister.

“He was from the royal family of his people. His family disqualified my sister as his prospective wife because...actually, they claimed simply that she wasn’t suitable for their son.” Destine disclosed.

“Snotty eh?” Aggie made a face, “When the royals of Europe are marrying commoners? Was it because your sister was not of his tribe?”

“No,” Destine grunted, “It was something else. My...ah, Auntie Aggie, please forgive me, but I don’t want to go there now, I’m sorry.”

She looked pained.

Aggie interjected quickly, “That is all right Destine. Don’t feel bad. I understand. It must be painful.”

Destine smiled brightly at Aggie. Then she frowned suddenly and exclaimed, “Oh selfish me! Auntie Aggie, were we not talking about the NEMESIS note?”

Aggie’s eyes narrowed curiously. She studied Destine briefly and asked unexpectedly, “How did you say the MUTE Alternative Library concept fitted into your course of study and thesis?”

Destine explained. “I feel that there is a gradual and persistent loss and erosion of our core self as a people, through the constant and consistent diminishing of the retention of our views about us. Our truth about our own selves is deliberately downplayed and made not to matter. These truths have been submerged and suffocated and taken over by the diluted versions of others about us. We are increasingly being made to psychologically view ourselves, as others want us to. Their truths about us are increasingly becoming our versions of the truth about our own selves too. The aim of MUTE to document events, thoughts, views and recol-

lections of especially the old, whose minds and thinking are less affected and influenced by today's distractions and globalization, is invaluable. The old folks are dying with what is inside their heads. Categorizing their information under a regular library system may be awkward and untenable. But gathering and documenting them is critical for us as a people philosophically, psychologically and sociologically. The MUTE Alternative Library concept would place this information under an orderly and classified system, to enhance accessibility and worth. That is how I intend to tackle the topic to fit into my course of study."

Aggie clapped. "Now I understand Dina's absolute fascination with you, Destine," she remarked.

Destine smiled gratefully.

Aggie studied her with a mixed expression. The gnawing something she couldn't lay a finger on was still there even after Destine's eloquent justification of her presence with MUTE. Why wasn't it going away?

Destine caught Aggie studying her. "Did you say someone died on your wedding day?" she said suddenly to break the spell of Aggie's curious stare, which had begun to make her nervous.

She succeeded. Aggie snapped out of her reverie. "We heard about it several days after the wedding," she responded.

"Was it a relative?" Destine asked.

Aggie shook her head. "It was a boy, an innocent boy, whose only crime was his curiosity. He was standing in the rain by the roadside waiting to catch a glimpse of our wedding procession. The storm had unknowingly brought down a power line. A live wire lay in the muddy water. He stepped on it."

"Oh God!" Destine cried.

Aggie chuckled bitterly. "My husband's late grandmother was an odd old woman. She was even branded a bad omen and later a

witch and barred from all of our marriage ceremonies because of her pronouncements. She used to have premonitions. She insisted there was a dark cloud hanging over our union and asked to be allowed to seek the help of the good ancestors to intervene and nullify the effects of it."

"How?" Destine burst in.

"Maybe something similar to what we do in the physical," Aggie began, "A offends B. A calls upon C and D who are good people and respected by B to go and see B to apologize on A's behalf. B forgives A. End of the matter. Except that this time it was spiritual, so the old woman needed to call on and communicate with the good spirits to go and beg the offended spirit to forgive whichever of us had offended it. And you know what that meant, don't you?"

Destine chortled. "Sacrifices, blood, a couple of white fowls and some bottles of Schnapps, perhaps."

Aggie laughed, "Against an imminent grand Christian church wedding. Can you imagine?" she asked.

Destine shook her head. "Out of the question."

Aggie sighed. "So instead of being allowed to do her thing, to nullify the bad omen, she herself was declared the bad omen."

Destine remarked thoughtfully, "Maybe she should have been allowed to have her way Auntie Aggie."

Aggie was astounded. "What do you think the church would have done if they had gotten wind of it?"

"Auntie Aggie," Destine empathized, "maybe you should try and have your dream interpreted. Aren't there dream interpreters?"

"There are of course. But first, I should be able to tell them the dream, no?" Aggie whined, "and I am never able to recollect it in full."

“And with the old woman also now dead?” Destine muttered.

Aggie nodded sadly. “It was always as if she had two additional eyes hidden somewhere inside her head,” she commented, “The feeling never left me that somehow something did happen. It was as if two opposing forces were unleashed into our marriage from the moment the unexpected clouds made nonsense of the weatherman’s prediction.”

Destine chuckled. “Funny isn’t it?”

“What?” Aggie asked.

“The unexpected rain. Had it been a funeral, it would have been deemed a blessing. A sign that the dead person was heaven bound.” Destine mused.

Aggie reflected pensively. “I think the opposing forces were there and waiting. They were lying low each with its simmering anger and waiting for the right time to clash, which they did on our wedding day. Almost like fate.”

Destine laughed. “So we are back to square one then.”

Aggie cocked a brow. “Why?”

“Fate,” Destine replied, “It is also connected to the same Greek mythology, like Nemesis. The Fates. They were three goddesses who determined the birth of life and the deaths of beings. They existed in both Greek and Roman mythology. The Fates were believed to rule people’s lives. They spun and cut the threads of life.”

Aggie’s neck suddenly felt as if an invisible hand was wrapped around it, squeezing out every ounce of life out of it. “Fate!” she mumbled, “The power that determines the course of events over which we have no control.”

“Yes,” Destine rejoined, “The three goddesses: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos; daughters of Zeus and Themis. The thread signified

a person's life. Clotho spun the thread while Lachesis decided on the length and Atropos cut it. Auntie Aggie, do you meditate?"

The question was so unexpected that Aggie burst into nervous laughter.

Destine didn't laugh. "I was once into Buddhism," she proceeded seriously.

Aggie was flabbergasted. "Really?"

"Yes. But I am now a practicing Christian. I desire to hold on to and believe in something inexplicable. I still meditate though. It helps me a lot."

Destine's seriousness struck Aggie. She continued observing Destine, saying nothing.

"I believe in fate. Karma." Destine went on, "I believe that one way or the other, we always pay for our misdeeds."

"You do?"

"Oh yes. But I differ on one point. Karma teaches that conditions of a person's ongoing life are the result of deeds from a previous life. But I believe that sometimes, a happening or happenings in a person's ongoing life is the result of deeds in the person's very ongoing life, both past and present."

Feeling the invisible hands around her neck tighten their grip, Aggie began to slowly breathe out. She searched Destine's face. Destine's eyes bore into hers. They were dead eyes. Destine's eyes had no life in them. They were ice cold dead.

"Oh God!" Destine exclaimed suddenly, "I almost forgot. I shouldn't have come today. I have an important family meeting. Auntie Aggie, I must leave," she announced and hastily gathered her belongings. "I must be off at once."

Aggie looked on in absolute shock and amazement as Destine packed her things. She muttered a hasty good bye to Aggie when she was done, dashed out of the office and literally flew across the

compound and out through the gate. Aggie was so stunned by the whole drama and sudden turn of events that she began to tremble. One minute they were discussing fate and Karma and the next minute there she was, alone. The office felt like a cemetery. She slumped down behind her table and tried to make some sense of it all. The familiar pounding in her head returned. It was severe. She placed her head on the table and closed her eyes. The tears began to flow.

It was in that state, hours later, that Dina and Vickie found Aggie on their return from the Pesewa family meeting.

“What happened to you?” Dina asked anxiously at the sight of Aggie, “Who upset you like this? Where is Destine?”

Aggie sighed heavily. “She’s gone,” she breathed.

“Gone? Where?” Dina shrieked.

Aggie pulled herself together. “She said she had to attend a family meeting. She virtually flew out of here.”

“Is that why you are crying so much?” Dina wailed.

A tiny smile registered on Aggie’s lips. “We were talking about the note. The NEMESIS note. She did some more reading on it.”

Vickie scowled. “Destine? How did she find out? Who told her about it? How did she get to know of it? Cast your minds back. Just the three of us discussed it inside Dina’s office. Remember? Destine was out of there then. Only the three of us were in there. Destine didn’t see it. We didn’t tell her either. At least I didn’t. Did any of you two?”

Both Dina and Aggie were so stunned that they could only shake their heads. Vickie was right. Unless one of them told Destine, she should not have known about the NEMESIS note.

“Are you sure it wasn’t you who brought it up before she came in?” Dina asked Aggie, trying to make some sense of it all.

Aggie shook her head. "I didn't bring it up first. But even if I had, where does her having gone to read more on it fit in? She knew about it, which was why she went reading more into it."

Each tried to find an answer. Find something. Then a thought struck Vickie and she rushed to Kabria's table which Destine had been occupying and pulled out all the drawers. They were all empty. Destine used to keep petty things like her pen case and comb and shoehorn in one drawer. They were all gone; even her notes and pens.

"Do you think she wrote the note herself?" Dina asked. She was heartbroken. She did truly like Destine or whoever she was.

Vickie said, "I am sure she did."

Suddenly Aggie roared with laughter and then convulsed into tears. "God! How could I have missed it?"

"What?" Dina asked and began to shed tears too.

Aggie wiped her face and blew her nose. "Do you know why I couldn't stand her perfume?" she stammered.

Dina and Vickie didn't respond. They waited for her to proceed.

"It was the same perfume that trailed Idan into our bedroom whenever he met with his lover, Randa."

Chapter Fourteen

SHE POUNDED ON his front door, yelling out her nephew's name, her battle with the letter 'L' rendering her Sylv, Siiv. She was the youngest sister of Sylv's father and noted for killing the 'L' whenever she mentioned Sylv's name.

"Agoo!" she yelled on, "Siiv, are you in? It is I your dear most loving aunt. I have come again. Open the door. Agoo!" And subjected Sylv's door to more hammering with her fist.

Sylv groaned in pure emotional agony at the sound of his aunt's voice. She was as enigmatic as she was a hundred percent pest.

On cue as it always was at the sound of Sylv's aunt voice, Let-them-say, growled angrily in support of its master. It was so loud that Sylv's aunt heard it and flinched in front of the closed door. She felt as if Let-them-say was right beside her and sniffing at her feet. She reacted. "Siiv, please, chain that beast of yours before you open the door. This dog of yours hates me Siiv. Why? Does it think I caused it its crooked hip, eh? It hates me too much. Ah why? I have never seen a dog that hates a human being like this dog hates me. Siiv, chain it please. And hurry up. I am here on a very important mission."

Sylv, in defiance, deliberately took his time. He made no attempt to defend Let-them-say or excuse its behavior. Indeed, when it came to his aunt, Sylv was in absolute agreement with his dog. Let-them-say hated her and Sylv didn't blame it because his aunt was the one who had created the battlefield and had drawn the

first sword on the very first day that aunt and dog met.

Sylv's aunt that day, landed at his door steps as usual, unexpected, uninvited and unwanted. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on whose side one was and from which point one viewed the incident, that day happened to be Sylv's chosen birthday for Let-them-say. And Let-them-say was celebrating its special day in grand style with one whole tin of Exeter brand corned beef all the way from Argentina. Let-them-say's birthday had nothing to do with when it inhaled the breath of the world for the first time upon emerging from its mother's womb and everything to do with the day that Sylv had discovered it half dead and abandoned by a roadside two years previously, on his way home from work. He had rushed it to a vet where it was established that the dog had developed a permanent limp in the right hind leg as a result of a dislocated hip from an old injury that had healed badly. The limp rendered its walk rather peculiar and comical; one that would definitely disqualify it for a doggy fashion catwalk. But boy! Did that dog have pride! With its head always held high, clearly conscious of its odd, ugly stride and not giving a damn what anyone else thought about it, dog or man, Sylv's attraction to it was instant. Love at first doggy sight. There was an air of 'I don't care a hoot what you think of my awkward limp. You can say what you like' about it. And that was what had precipitated all of that first day it met and signed the enemy pact with its master's aunt was the woman shrieking and pointing menacingly at it as if it had gone and stolen her bone.

She had shrieked as if she had just chanced upon Angel Gabriel doing the boogaloo in a disco.

"Siiv!!! Corned beef? Corned beef for a dog?"

Sylv had tried to explain to her that it was Let-them-say's special birthday treat and not its normal daily. But his aunt was

consumed with too much shock and disbelief to listen.

“Siiv!” she raged on, “Is part of your brain melting? Is it because you don’t visit home regularly? I must apply boiled herbs to your head one of these days.”

Then to Sylv’s dismay, his aunt dashed to his small kitchen, searched his garbage can, dipped her hand into it, fished out the empty corned beef tin, checked the label and shrieked even more hysterically, “Yeeeh!!! Exeter? Exeter corned beef for a dog with such a crooked hip? Siiv! Even if you had to feed your dog with corned beef, couldn’t you lessen the abomination by picking one of those on the market produced at nowhere on earth? Did it have to be Exeter? Even me your dear aunt, ask me how many times I eat corned beef in a year. Look Siiv, it is you who work at a popular radio station. Many people listen to you. If you like, bring people to the village to come and see for themselves. They will be lucky if they can count more than five children who have tasted even the cheapest corned beef, let alone Exeter. And you sit here and feed it to a dog with a crooked hip?”

Let-them-say had by then sensed that the whole fracas had to do with himself and reacted instantly. With its ears flattened backwards, its eyes burrowed into Sylv’s aunt’s, the hair on its neck and its back rose up as it snarled furiously with its lips pulled dangerously back.

“Aunt, stop it!” Sylv warned as his aunt kept pointing her finger menacingly at Let-them-say, “It will bite you!”

Sylv’s tone and Let-them-say’s posture told his aunt to better not let the warning be repeated. She withdrew. Let-them-say reverted to normalcy as Sylv approached it. It crouched down playfully with one leg raised, submitting to its master. But the enemy pact had been signed between dog and aunt.

For the love and respect of its master, however, Let-them-say

always submitted and allowed itself to be chained to the back door whenever the enemy announced her presence.

“Be back with you soon, lady,” Sylv muttered to Let-them-say and patted its head after it had submitted to being chained.

Let-them-say lowered its tail and enjoyed the brief touch of its master’s loving hand. Sylv went to the front door and opened it for his aunt. She rushed in and took a seat in the small living room before she was even invited to sit down. Sylv fetched a glass of water. She took a quick sip, made a rude face and snapped, “I prefer a beer.”

She was no stranger to the house. She knew her nephew always had beer somewhere in the house. Sylv obliged and brought out a chilled bottle of Star beer from the fridge for her. She opened it, served herself, gulped down half the contents at the first take, put down the half empty glass, smiled broadly and brightly, obviously gingered up by the intake and spluttered, “See why I love coming to you, Siiv? How can I afford such a good bottle of Star beer back in the village? Ah! My dear nephew, rich people are enjoying life, oh! Money is sweet. Ah!” And grinning, she lifted the glass again to her lips.

Sylv became irritated. “Aunt, you said you came here on an urgent mission. I think we should start talking about it.” He would have loved to add, “So you can start walking away from here.”

His aunt grinned rather foolishly, “Oh yes! Yes! A very serious matter!” She refilled her glass and raised the bottle to check its remaining contents. She didn’t like what she saw and made a face. Sylv got the message. “Aunt, there is another bottle in the fridge for after you have made your mission known.”

She understood her nephew. “Oh! All right Siiv!” and cleared her throat. Then she adjusted herself in the seat and said, “Siiv, it is this: someone came to the village. She came all the way from

here to the village to see the Queenmother concerning you.”

“Me?” Sylv said, surprised.

“Yes. Something to do with your work.”

“What?”

“Siiv,” his aunt went on, ignoring Sylv’s reaction, “From what I was told, the visitor is very influential. I didn’t meet her myself. As I was told, she didn’t spend even more than thirty minutes in the village. Ei! My nephew, they say the car she drove in to the village eh...anyway, it was another prominent daughter of the village also living here in Accra like you who arranged for her to meet the Queenmother.”

“About me?”

“Yes. And my dear nephew, see, the Queenmother granted her immediate audience, so that should tell you that the person must be quite powerful and influential in society. As soon as she left, the Queenmother sent for our female head and discussed the visitor’s request with her. They then decided to nominate a member of our household to whom you were more likely than not, to listen to.”

“You!” Sylv stated blandly.

“Of course,” his aunt proclaimed.

Incredulous, Sylv pondered. Why would someone choose that path and go to that length to interfere with his work at Harvest FM?

His aunt went on. “Siiv, it is about a certain wealthy man who died recently.”

Sylv could not believe his ears. “What?”

“Yes Siiv,” his aunt said, “According to the visitor, you have troubled the family a great deal and you continue to harass them. She said that first, after they announced the death of her brother from natural causes; you and the man’s 5th Wife put ideas into

people's heads, which made a laughing stock of their family. The man's 5th Wife also made some wild claims, which you supported with your programme. After that, you helped the 5th Wife to go back into hiding. She said because of your encouragement of the man's 5th Wife's truancy..."

"Truancy?" Sylv yelled.

"Yes. Because of that the family has not been able to purify the 5th widow to date. All this and you are still not satisfied."

"This is outrageous, unbelievable!" Sylv hissed, slapping his thighs in despair, "What..."

"Let me finish," his aunt cut him short, sounding very serious, "According to the visitor, as she complained to the Queenmother, thanks to you, the memory of her beloved and respected late brother has been dragged into the mud because you first made known to the public that her brother had AIDS."

"The AIDS virus!" Sylv corrected, "Not the full blown AIDS. That was what I made known!"

"Whatever!" his aunt waved her hand in dismissal. "Whether AIDS or AIDS virus or HIV, it's all the same shame and stigmatization. And the family had wanted that to remain within the family."

Sylv's expression hardened. "Aunt, now let me also tell you something." His tone compelled his aunt to pay full attention to him. "It is the attitude of people like this visitor to the Queenmother which causes victims like Pesewa to choose to end their lives rather than continue to live with the AIDS virus. What did she mean by her late brother's memory had been dragged into the mud by the revelation that he tested positive?"

His aunt was baffled. How could her nephew not see and understand the visitor's point? "Siiv, do you mean to say that you don't empathize with her position? This is abominable. You

have connived with his 5th Wife to bring his entire family into irreparable disrepute.”

“Disrepute?”

“Yes Siiv! Why should an honourable man, as he was, be associated with a disgraceful disease like AIDS?”

Sylv wailed in frustration. His aunt was never going to get it. “Aunt...”

“Yes Siiv.”

“Did they send you to check if 5th Wife was hiding here?”

“Oh Siiv, no!” she laughed, “But they are not happy Siiv. They are not happy at all. And when people are not happy, they may try to do something...anything, to end the cause and source of their unhappiness. Especially if they happen to be rich and powerful as the family of the dead man are. Just look at the extent they’ve gone to: coming to see our village Queenmother, to seek her intervention. Who next would they go and see? They are not a weak and small family Siiv. Do you get what I mean Siiv?”

Sylv shook with rage. “Aunt, did the visitor issue any threat? You must let me know because if she did, then I’ll repeat every word of this conversation on my GMG show. Did she?”

“No Siiv! No,” his aunt shrieked, “Siiv, why are you doing this? Why? The family is already mourning their loss. Why do you want to worsen their case?”

“Aunt...”

“Wait Siiv, wait! Look,” she went on brusquely, “it is you who have become the big Siiv in the city, but don’t forget that many of your family members are still poor and living in the village. Please! Don’t sit here in your comfortable flat feeding your dog corned beef while creating problems for those of us back in the village, for who one tin of corned beef a year is even impossible.”

Sylv winced. Subtle blackmail was what his aunt was attempt-

ing. He knew it too well. Whenever she wasn't getting her way in an argument with him, she brought up the issue of the corned beef fed to Let-them-say. She knew he didn't want the people back in the village to know about it. They would judge him as wicked for choosing to feed a dog corned beef when children in his village had never tasted any. And such a blind judgment slapped on him could be catastrophic for his esteem in the village. His aunt knew this, which was why she kept it to herself. But by keeping it to herself, it had proven to be a more powerful and effective tool, and strengthened the impression in the village, that Sylv always listened to his aunt.

"It wasn't an ordinary person who sent me to you, but the Queenmother, Siiv," she went on, "and I was entreated to talk to you and to let what I say enter your head and ears properly, because we don't want any problem. You told everyone on your programme that Pesewa took his own life because he had AIDS."

"Aunt..."

"Let me finish. You helped the 5th Wife to escape after she appeared on your show. You cast a slur on the sacred custom and tradition of the widowhood purification rite. And now look at what you paid someone to do again?"

Sylv's eyes rolled into his head. So there was more to all this? He had been wondering if the headache he was supposed to have caused Pesewa's family was all there was to it. Apparently it wasn't. "What is it again that I am supposed to have done to displease Pesewa's powerful family?" he asked with biting sarcasm.

His aunt's eyes narrowed. "Don't pretend with me, Siiv!" she warned.

"Don't pretend what?" Sylv was perplexed.

His aunt, convinced that Sylv was still putting on an act, grunted, "Siiv, can you imagine what kind of reception would

await you in the village if you stepped there after you have ignored my advice and disobeyed the Queenmother? Especially too when finally I make known to all that while you have never fed a child back there a tin of corned...

"Aunt! This sounds like blackmail!" Sylv interjected.

His aunt smiled. "No Siiv," she spoke calmly, "It is to enable you to fully grasp and understand the heat. You cannot disregard the Queenmother. Find something to tell your big people at your workplace. I am sure the money didn't come from your pocket."

Sylv became desperate. "What money?"

"The one that was used to bribe someone at the hospital."

Sylv realized then that something had happened which everyone suspected he knew about, but about which he didn't have the slightest clue. He decided to play along. "Oh that? Aunt, I had no hand in it at all. My bosses were completely responsible for it!" he feigned.

"But ultimately it is you who would use it on your programme, no?"

"Well...yes."

"Good Siiv! Good!" His aunt lowered her voice like two people conniving and loving it to the hilt. "Look, all that the family is asking is that you don't air it. At least not now. They want some peace while they plan the man's funeral. They are all equally stunned by the result. I mean, it made natural sense that all initially should suspect the 5th Wife. Is it true she has had about three tests?"

"Yes aunt, yes!" Sylv mumbled, his curiosity as sharp and erect as if his world had gone completely confused. What the hell was this that his aunt talking about?

"And is it true that all three tests came up negative?"

“Yes, Aunt,” Sylv intoned.

At least that bit made sense. He knew that, but not what his aunt apparently knew and had assumed he also knew.

“How could it have happened that way?” his aunt wondered about the seemingly perplexing situation Sylv knew nothing about.

Sylv continued to play along. “We wondered too!” he said.

He was dying to talk to Muff to make some sense of it all.

“So you promise not to mention it on your show?” asked his aunt seeking assurance.

Sylv placed his right hand on his chest. “I promise,” he said.

His aunt smiled. “Good. The family will be happy. The Queen—mother too. Good Siiv. Good. Did you say there was another bottle of beer in the fridge?”

Sylv called Muff when after quaffing the second bottle of beer and with her words slurring and her eyelids drooping, his aunt succumbed to the conquest of the booze, stretched out on Sylv’s sofa and invaded his living room with her heavy snoring.

“Muff, my aunt...you know, the one who calls me Siiv.”

Muff laughed.

“Muff!”

“What?”

“She is here.”

“Where?”

“Silly! Where else? Where am I calling you from?”

“Your aunt is with you at your place?”

“Right here beside me on my sofa and snoring like a grandmother bear. She *quaffed* my two chilled bottles and in between, released a truckload of parables that has left me grounded on

zero in confusion. What is this about Pesewa's four wives? It was evidently they she was talking about."

"What is it?" Muff asked back, "I only know what you know; what we all know; that after the message to the family head from 5th Wife's family head and the promise to communicate the truth to Pesewa's spirit before his burial, the older four wives were ordered by the family head to submit themselves to HIV tests."

"And?"

"And what?"

"The results Muff. My aunt came talking real strange. The test results appear to have leaked and Pesewa's family, or at least the oldest sister, thinks that Harvest FM and I paid someone at the hospital to get access to the results."

"The test results?"

"Yes, so I would use them on my GMG show."

"What utter rubbish!" Muff snapped.

"Not to my aunt and family back home; not to mention the Queenmother."

"Are you joking?"

"Do I sound like I am?"

Muff whistled.

"My aunt was sent to come and convince me...no, warn me not to use the information they think I have..."

"Which neither you nor I, your producer, have..."

"Exactly."

"So now what?" Muff asked.

"I think you should come over," Sylv suggested.

"And meet your loving Aunt Siiv? No way. You come over instead."

"And leave my loving Aunt Siiv here alone with her best buddy Let-them-say? It will devour her with glee the moment it realizes

it is in the flat with her alone!” Sylv jibed.

Muff pondered briefly. “Then let me find out what is happening from 5th Wife’s sister and get back to you.”

Maa Cherie was on the telephone in her tiny office at the salon and had just finished discussing an acceptable price for some packets of hair rollers she intended to buy, when her chief apprentice, Fingers, strode in. She was holding a copy of the hot gossip paper “T&T” – the abbreviation for “Talk let Talk”.

“Maa Cherie,” she called, “the vendor just brought your paper. *Shiee*... the T&T people, they are magicians, oh! How do they get their information? Look at their front page headline.”

Maa Cherie chuckled. “Fingers, it is I who always pay for the paper but you happen to always read it first. What is on the front page?”

“That rich man who killed himself.”

“Pesewa?”

“Yes. *Shiee*, Madam look; they say only his 5th Wife tested negative. The older four wives have all tested positive for the AIDS virus.”

Maa Cherie snatched the paper from Fingers. “All four?” she exclaimed, searching for the article.

“That is what it said. All four. *Ei!* T&T too, how do they get their information?”

“How else Fingers?” Maa Cherie replied, settling down to enjoy her gossip paper, “Same old evil. Good old money! Take care of the salon. I’ll be back soon.”

“*Shiee!!!*” Fingers howled again as she left her madam’s tiny office, still not believing what she had just read in T&T, “All four older wives HIV positive?”

Chapter Fifteen

THE EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY screamed, “Goooooooooal!!!”

“It was not a goal! It was offside. It was not a goal!” his ten-year old playmate countered.

“It was a goal!” the eight-year old insisted.

“I said it was not a goal!” the ten-year old persisted.

Kofi Poku, alias Raja Hey, alias Who Killed Lucy, alias Pardon Me, alias Forever Young, alias Prophet Abednego, cursed under his breath. He needed sleep urgently. He had been up throughout the night till dawn, preaching the word of God, as he knew best and screaming the need for repentance in the name of the Lord to sleeping ears. Now that he required sleep, those Abedi Pele hopefuls had come to nurture their dreams right outside his window, to deny him the peace he needed.

On weekends and holidays when the boys didn't go to school, they never allowed him his morning sleep. He had once seized their football to force them to stop playing. Unfortunately, the mother of one of the boys was very cantankerous. She had burst in on him, virtually pouncing on him and retrieved the ball. Then she had launched into an unprovoked verbal attack. “Foolish man!” she had yelled, obstinately refusing to acknowledge his ‘prophetship’, “If you are a man, dare to seize their ball again! Are you blind? Can't you see that this place is a public park? Where else do you want them to go and play? Was it them or me who told you not to sleep at night? Have you considered the people

whose sleep you disrupted with your loud and deceitful preaching? Nonsense!”

Prophet Abednego never raised a voice against the rowdy young footballers ever again. When they went to school he enjoyed his good daytime sleep. Too bad for those office workers probably feeling drowsy behind their tables at their various work places as a result of his middle of the night preaching. When holidays and non school going days brought them back to the park, he cursed, endured them and perfected his plans. Oh yes! He had a plan.

After his visit weeks ago, he had thought, had indeed hoped, that Sylv would broach his visit and prophecy on his show. He had been seeking an opportunity to gather the first few willing sheep of his church-in-progress. He could start it under a tree somewhere and with time, move into any available structure; a school building vacant and unused on Sundays or an uncompleted structure. He even had the name for his church ready. ‘Blood of Hope Miracle Prosperity and Wonders Church’. His only ally was time. If only Sylv had mentioned the incident on his GMG show. His plan ‘A’ had been based on that hope.

It was a connection man who had given him the Harvest FM contract. And before he had executed it, he had met the contractors once. A brother and a sister who wanted to have a look at him to convince themselves that he was perfect for the contract; and who also went to great lengths to ensure that he wouldn’t be able to recognize any of them later. The man wore a broad-brimmed black cowboy felt hat and a pair of dark shades for his eyes, while the woman had on a rather ridiculous blond Afro wig and dark sunglasses. They had come in a taxi. The prophecy was cooked. The brother and sister knew already that the father of that woman working with the organization of four women was afflicted in one leg. His prophecy had already come true. All

it required was a bit of publicity. He had hoped the GMG show presenter would provide that, and he would have been in business. The way Ghanaians loved miracles, he would have been declared a strong and powerful Man of God and they would have flocked to him like sheep. Whether he was operating under a tree or a rock would not have mattered. But it was still not late.

Six whole years he had been hustling in Accra, since he together with his bosom friend Agyei Poku, alias Cityman bid farewell to his village. Back then, it was Cityman who had convinced him that unless they left their small remote village and migrated to Accra to seek greener pastures, they would rot. Did Raja Hey know that young guys like them were selling dog chains along the busy streets of Accra and making lots of money? Did Raja Hey know that some of these young guys eventually progressed from selling dog chains to becoming migrants in Libya en route to Europe?”

Cityman lectured Raja Hey as if as soon as they stepped foot on the outskirts of Accra, they would be met with a bag full of dog chains and a huge welcoming smile with the proclamation, “Welcome to Accra. Find in this bag your beloved dog chains. You have been assigned the street from 37 Military Hospital to the Airport traffic lights. Have a jolly time.”

The reality when they arrived in Accra was to loiter day in and day out around the Accra railway station hoping and praying for something to happen. Then one day, something happened and initially it seemed like the sun had at long last shone on them. A man mercilessly trailed by the too well known scent of ‘*fos*’, approached them out of the blue and asked, “Are you new in Accra?”

The man was in the true sense of the word, *fos* – full. *Fos* trousers, *fos* shirt, *fos* cap, *fos* socks, *fos* shoe.

Raja Hey and Cityman replied that yes they were.

“You want work?” Fos man asked.

“Oh yes!” Raja Hey and Cityman wailed desperately.

“Fine. I’ll help you!” Fos man assured them, “I help people especially young guys like you from my tribe. I overheard you conversing. Can you pound?”

“What?”

“Pound. Fufu. Can you pound fufu?”

“Yes,” they stammered, disappointment already setting in.

“Then follow me. You have a job.”

The fufu pounding at a chop bar turned out to be a good job. The pay was ridiculous but they had enough to eat every day.

One Easter Monday, they joined some friends for a jam at the beach. A guy in an obscenely tight pair of indigo swim pants and wearing two gold chains with no pendants approached them. He engaged them in casual conversation and found out about their job. Then he informed them of how they could earn far more from a proposal he had for them for far less tedious work and the bonus of probably some enjoyment too. He gained their full attention.

“All you need to do is to bury your inhibitions,” indigo pants went on, “The job is simple. Some white people who visit the country from abroad don’t like women. Have you heard about that?”

Raja Hey and Cityman had. They knew that such men preferred to do it with fellow men. But they still didn’t know where they came in.

“I am one of the regular connection men here at the beach,” Indigo pants went on eagerly, “They will do it with you small and pay you big money.”

Raja Hey almost reacted angrily but suppressed it upon looking

at Cityman whose thoughts and reactions were not discernible.

Indigo pants went on unabated. "Some of them pay in dollars and euros. Three of the young men I personally engaged are now in Europe. Another two are in America. The white men they met here bought their tickets and bore all their expenses. What do you think?"

Neither replied.

Indigo pants smiled to himself. Young men who react appalled and disgusted initially, often mellowed after he had played the dollar and euro card. He gave Raja Hey and Cityman a piece of paper each, with his contact number.

Neither mentioned the indigo pant man again. The following day both of them returned to their job at the chop bar. A week later, Raja Hey woke up at dawn and found Cityman gone. He returned two days later but wouldn't disclose where he had been. When Raja Hey attempted to probe, Cityman flew into a rage. They retired to bed that night with an ongoing cold war between them. By the time dawn broke, Cityman was gone.

Several weeks later, a strange looking bearded man came looking for Raja Hey. He said that someone had tipped him to come and see Raja Hey about something that he wanted to buy and which Raja Hey could provide. When a perplexed Raja Hey asked to know what the man was talking about since he himself had no idea at all what he was supposed to be selling, the strange bearded man smiled and said he would be in touch. He never showed up again. As mysteriously as he had appeared, he had disappeared. Two days after the bearded man's visit to Raja Hey, Cityman's body was washed ashore at the beach. Cityman found his final resting place at Mile Eleven, in a *wawa* coffin, sharing his grave with seven other bodies of unknowns and unclaimed in similar *wawa* coffins.

Raja Hey suspected but never found out nor understood the connection between Cityman's death and the visit from the strange bearded man.

He was named Kofi Poku at birth. Now he called himself Prophet Abednego. In between and not necessarily in that order, he had been Raja Hey, Who Killed Lucy, for watching a video film of same title ten times, Pardon Me, for his attempt at attracting the attention of a girl by assuming an American accent and uttering 'pardon me' God knows how many times even when the girl, a fried yam seller, snarled, "If you don't get away from my face with your ugliness you will see what I'll do to you with this hot oil!" This earned him the name Forever Young for a reason he had absolutely no idea about.

Suddenly Raja Hey found himself alone and scared. He would tremble and sweat if he sensed or felt that someone was looking at him for what to him was longer than necessary. He considered returning to the village, for a while at least. That was the endearing warmth of the village. It was simply home. When one needed to top up one's energy, after the hustle and bustle of the city had depleted it, one simply headed back for the village. And when one was going back to visit the village, one didn't need to inform or forewarn of one's arrival. One simply went. So Raja Hey could have returned. But the peace he was going to seek there would have eluded him because he would have had to constantly contend with questions about the whereabouts of Cityman. He had left home with Cityman. He could not return without Cityman. Where was Cityman?

Raja Hey became a walking, lonely, dead scared man. He left his chop bar job and quit his sleeping place at the railway station for a lorry station near the Kwame Nkrumah Circle. Here too he ran into connection men, but they hired him for specific jobs.

Unscrupulous pastors of little known churches of dubious shades and colours would come and hire people to go and pretend to be deaf and dumb or blind and receive instant miraculous healing at their church services to swell the members of their congregation. Hustling around the Nkrumah Circle one day he was hired for a special assignment. It was a very delicate role, the connection man warned him, but he had been observing Raja Hey closely for some time now and was sure that Raja would be up to the task. If Raja performed this role successfully, he could look forward to higher heights with confidence, the connection man told him.

Raja took the job and performed excellently. He acted as a distant relative of a woman, who had been sent to her from the village by the family head. In the presence of the woman's husband, Raja relayed the cooked up message, which essentially required the woman's urgent and immediate presence for a family meeting in her home town. Raja had been fed some basic information about the woman and her family to enable him to answer any questions that the woman's husband might put to him. The woman got what she wanted, which was to leave her marital home for the whole weekend with the knowledge and blessing of her husband. Raja had no idea why the woman needed to lie to get out of her marital home and didn't care to know either. He did however entertain the thought that a married woman who was willing to pay so much money to have a hired hand lie for her as he had, would want the hired hand to keep his mouth shut. Then Raja further deliberated over what he had been paid for. He had been paid for the role he played to get her out of the house, not for him to keep his mouth shut afterwards. Shouldn't he get paid something extra for that too?

In toying with those thoughts, however, Raja overlooked one crucial point, which was that he was dealing with connection

men, and connection men knew that people they sometimes hired to play such roles were sometimes tempted to entertain such thoughts. Raja had been paid part of the money with the promise that he would be paid the rest when the woman paid the connection man. He kept his promise except that the woman had already paid him when he explained the terms to Raja. It was a ploy he always adopted.

Raja for his part was waiting to receive the full payment and then go about his other plan. Alas the day came. The connection man counted the rest of the money into Raja's hand then looked him straight in the eye and said, "Don't think of, let alone attempt, to dig twice into the same money hole!"

All Raja could recollect thereafter was the connection man's eyes as he issued the warning. They were like steel.

Raja didn't need to shelve his fantasies about blackmailing the woman for hush money. The fantasies died.

Then another opportunity cropped up in the form of a preacherman, alias Wahala, a street preacher. He engaged Raja as his assistant with the main duty of keeping an eagle eye on the collection money people would donate, because some people were really bad. Not only would they not give Preacherman a penny, but would also want to help themselves to what others had given him. Preacherman preached around the Rawlings Park. The shop owners and the market women were a ready and willing congregation. Preacherman was an expert in delivering electrifying prayers. He could let the Holy Spirit descend upon him in one second and depart the very next. It was as if the Holy Spirit was at Preacherman's beck and call. The market women were exceptionally generous when Preacherman delivered one of his fiery prayers to ward off, as he put it, the wandering evil spirits retarding the women's pace of sales. However, Preacherman also never forgot to always remind

them that the more cash offerings they made, the more the Good Lord would turn his generosity machine to reward them.

Raja began to study Preacherman from all aspects and master his techniques: the varying pitches of his voice, the movements of his hands and the positions of his feet. Then whenever he had some free time, Raja would go to the seaside and stroll up and down the length of the beach practicing the art of fiery prayers and preaching. One day, after practicing for the last time along the sea-side he certified himself as having qualified to be on his own as a street preacher. He made his way back to his abode at the Nkrumah Circle humming a self-composed tune to himself:

Who said Accra no sweet?

Accra sweet!

Accra sweet *paaaaaaa!*

He quit working for Preacherman. From the little he had saved, he paid for a tiny room in an uncompleted house. Unlike Preacherman, however, Raja Hey took his 'Godly' services away from central Accra to the outskirts. He started with the many small satellite markets springing up. The women of these markets who had not had the same opportunities as their counterparts in the inner city with regard to fiery prayers for their daily successful sales, embraced Raja Hey who electrified them with his prayers. In comparison with what Preacherman was making around the Rawlings Park, the money that Raja made from the satellite markets was nothing to write home about. But Raja Hey, now operating as Prophet Abednego, bided his time. He knew that one day an opportunity for a flock of followers and a permanent place to spread the word would come. So when he could, he roamed the streets at night to preach; the sole purpose being so people would know who he was and become familiar with his voice. Unknown to Raja however, he was being closely monitored and

watched. Connection men always kept track of all those whose services they had once employed. So they observed with keen interest the progress of Raja Hey to Prophet Abednego. They knew that come one day they would find the metamorphosed Raja Hey useful and beneficial. That day came when the sister in the blond Afro wig with her brother in that broad cowboy hat came seeking the services of a connection man to get someone to be a Man of God who would go and deliver a message to Sylv Po at Harvest FM.

The mantle fell instantly on Prophet Abednego.

Even as Prophet Abednego set off to fulfill the task at Harvest FM, he saw the prospect of the kind of opportunity he had been waiting for.

This wasn't like the fantasies he had toyed with after the role he had played to get the woman out of her marital home that weekend with her husband's blessing. This plan of his involved no extortion, or as the connection man chose to put it, 'digging twice into the same hole'. Moreover it was not like he was pretending to be Prophet Abednego. He was Prophet Abednego, who was only taking advantage of a role he played to further expand his horizon. He would hurt no one. The plan was perfect. All he needed was a rival radio station to Harvest FM to execute his plan. He settled on Bright FM, because they broadcast mainly in various local languages and its target group spoke mainly local languages. He placed a call to the station and left a brief and mysterious message. "My name is Prophet Abednego. I prophesied and made a prediction about one of a group of four women of an organization here in Accra. My prophecy has come true. Ask Sylv Po of Harvest FM about it. I will be in touch."

The morning show host of Bright FM didn't need to be told which organization it was that the strange caller was referring to.

When an organization of four women was mentioned in relation to Harvest FM, everyone knew it was MUTE.

MUTE was loved by some and hated by others. With its Alternative Library concept yet to be fully understood and appreciated, the process of reaching there had been seen by some as nosing around and barging into the private lives of people in the name of research. If a prediction had been made about one of the four women of MUTE to no other station than Harvest FM and to Sylv Po in particular, why had the GMG show host, noted for lifting the lid off other people's affairs, remained tight lipped about this one? Was it because it was disconcerting and could prove humiliating to that MUTE woman or to the organization itself? But shouldn't members of an organization like MUTE with its 'too-known' attitude, as if it understood best all the problems of Ghanaian women, and who was always nosing around other people's backyards, also be prepared to have its own backyard nosed into as well?

Bright FM called Sylv and sought confirmation of the prophet's claim.

Sylv didn't deny it.

"So why have you remained so tight lipped about such an intriguing story?" the Bright FM host asked.

Sylv explained that in addition to the prophet's abrupt departure from Harvest FM that day, he also felt that an affliction on one of the member's father's legs was the member's private matter. He had also been occupied with the late Pesewa and his 5th Wife's saga.

"We think you are being partial and unfair Sylv!" the Bright FM host accused, "in the way you have probed into the late Pesewa's case to the displeasure of his family. Do you mean to say that one person's private matter is more private and valuable and

must therefore be kept under wraps than another's? How can the listening public be denied such a story?"

Sylv stuttered, "I have not been in touch with the MUTE member to find out if the prophet's prophecy was true or not. If you will oblige me, I'll do that immediately and get back to you."

About fifteen minutes later Sylv called the Bright FM host to confirm that the prophet's prophecy was indeed true. Aggie's father had been afflicted with what appeared to be a boil of some kind on one leg.

The Bright FM host went into frenzy as they eagerly waited for Prophet Abednego to call back as he had promised. This was going to be one hell of a juicy story. Listeners were told to stay tuned for a hot news item.

Randa was home administering Ma's drugs to her when Cora called and told her to tune in to Bright FM. Cora cautioned her to keep it out of Ma's hearing.

Kweku was in the office when Cora placed a similar call through to him. She knew that Kweku's dial was almost always on Harvest FM.

By the time Prophet Abednego called, radio dials on Bright FM were blaring through loud speakers at market places, salons, offices and lorry stations. Ghanaians loved any news to do with miracles as they loved their fufu and kenkey and akple. Everybody waited anxiously for what Ghana's newly discovered very strong and powerful pastor would say.

When he called, everywhere went dead quiet.

"How are we to know that you on the line are indeed Prophet Abednego?" the Bright FM host asked.

Raja Hey responded by recounting in detail all that happened

the day he called at Harvest FM, from the moment of his arrival at the gates till his abrupt and unceremonious departure. He recounted in detail the outfit of the receptionist and even the color of her lipstick.

“So where are you now?” the host asked, “What are you doing?”

Raja Hey replied that till then he had been a freelance preacher. But with this clear and powerful sign from God, in view of the revelation he had received about the father of the MUTE woman, he felt obliged to share God’s glory and blessing.

“Do you have a church already?” he was asked.

“Yes,” Raja Hey replied.

“Is it registered?” the host asked.

“I don’t need man’s paper acknowledgement of my church to do God’s work!” Raja pronounced, betraying a little irritation.

The Bright FM host quickly sought to undo the near provocation, lest Prophet Abednego did the disappearing act like he did with Sylv. “Many people are listening to you, Prophet Abednego. If anyone wants to come and join your church, where would they find it? What of others who may want to come for consultation? Where can they locate you?”

Raja didn’t feel comfortable about the way the questioning was going. He jumped into what he wanted the listeners to hear. “God has worked one miracle through me. I am convinced that it is the first of many miracles to come!” he launched his pitch, “In fact, I consider the many people who have tuned in and are listening to me are my followers. All I need is to find a place where my followers and I will congregate. So I am reaching out at this moment to anyone out there who at this very instant is feeling something inside to help. The person is out there and has ready premises I can use as the holy ground to gather my followers. I

am urging my followers. I am urging the person to call. Call! Call this very instant. I can feel the spirit. Call.”

The Bright FM host couldn’t halt Prophet Abednego who had just allotted himself free airtime to advertise his pressing need. He said, “Prophet Abednego, many churches have sprung up and continue to spring up. What makes you think that your church which is yet to be registered and formed will be different from the many that are already in the system?”

Raja chuckled pompously and retorted, “Do I even need to answer that? Name me one prophet who started as I did? Going about his regular business, receiving a revelation from God about the father of a woman he has never seen or heard of before and pang! It lands. True and precise. Pang!” He quickly replaced the receiver, checking himself. Gosh! That was close. He nearly betrayed himself. It was the excitement. That nearly got him talking like Raja Hey. Pang? A whole Prophet Abednego of God? Pang?

Randa listened to Prophet Abednego in the living room. She returned to the bedroom to check on Ma, who was dozing. Some of her anti manic depression drugs had a drowsy effect on her. Randa studied Ma’s solemn figure sadly. “Oh Ma!” she moaned silently, “Of all the trigger elements, did yours have to be flowers? Our backs are against the wall Ma. It is the only way to get that look into her eyes. And that look is our only hope left not to risk offending your soul, because we your children cannot hold a funeral for you without flowers upon your return to your Maker. How can the world ever understand that? So you must heal Ma. You must heal before you join your Maker. And only when she gets that look wholly, absolutely and completely, when that look creeps into her eyes, we will know that she is healed. It is that look which is our only hope left for her healing.”

From his office, Kweku placed a call to Cora. He was overwhelmed and paralyzed by Prophet Abednego on Bright FM.

“The Bible said it, sister,” Kweku said abruptly.

“What?” Cora snapped.

“Vengeance is God’s. Not men’s. I hope we haven’t created a monster Cora. I pray to God that we haven’t.”

Cora laughed like one possessed. “We haven’t Kweku,” she assured her brother. “We haven’t at all. Indeed, this parody of a prophet has just enriched our arrangements.”

Sylv Po’s worst fears were confirmed the next morning. A woman walked personally to Bright FM to offer Prophet Abednego the use of an uncompleted building belonging to her brother who was resident in Germany. “He can use it for as long as it takes him to secure a permanent structure for his church!” she told Bright FM.

The host became suspicious. “Were you just touched by the prophet yesterday? Is that why you are making him this offer?” he asked the woman.

The woman smiled shyly. “Actually I also have one humble request for the powerful prophet!” she confessed. “You see, my brother, the one whose uncompleted building I am offering to the prophet, has been trying for years to get me to join him in Hamburg. The money he has wasted eh! We tried the direct way. I went to the German Embassy myself and collected forms. We submitted everything the Embassy asked for. The time came. I went to the Embassy. No visa. Reject. *Ei!* So we tried connection men. Three! Three connection men. And what they all did was chop our money. Today bring this, tomorrow do that! *Ei!* Then one pastor told me why I wasn’t succeeding in getting my visa.”

“He did?”

“Yes. He had a revelation. It was a member of our family. One of those bad old women. Unfortunately, the pastor couldn’t see her face in the revelation, only her feet. In the revelation the witch had used her huge ugly evil feet to stamp on my German visa...”

“Inside your passport?”

“No. In the spirit.”

“The German visa has a spirit?”

“*Ei!* Don’t you know? *Ei!* Then you don’t know what is happening! Hm, those witches, when they stamp on your visa in the spirit, you can move heaven and earth. Forget it. Because at the Embassy, when the visa officer sees you, he or she doesn’t see a human being oh!”

“No?”

“No. Your face turns into worms and cockroaches.”

“That is what the visa officer sees? Worms and cockroaches?”

“Yes. And who would grant a visa to worms and cockroaches?”

“Oh dear! So the pastor who had the revelation, what did he do about it?”

The woman sighed heavily. “Now you have asked the important question. He tried prayers and fasting. He made me even fast too and rinse my face three times a day with holy water...”

“To enable the visa officer to see your real face instead of the worms and cockroaches?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Failure.”

“It didn’t work? All the prayers and fasting and holy water?”

“It was the pastor. He wasn’t strong. Not knowing people had even been complaining about him. He always gets revelations, no

miracle. Not even one single miracle has been credited to him.

“But I think that this Prophet Abednego is so strong and powerful. I am sure he will be able to tie up the feet of that witch so that the present ongoing arrangements will go through successfully for me to get my visa for Germany.”

Chapter Sixteen

THE SWELLING WAS not a boil, not an ordinary boil, not a spiritual one and not an evil cow boil, whatever that was. It was something else. Even Ntifor was convinced. A boil would have started off as a reddened swelling, painful and full of pus. It would have continued to swell till the Good Lord told it to swell no more, whereupon it would have burst to release its contents of dead white blood cells, serum and tissue debris. The sore it left behind normally healed within a short period. But not so with the swelling on Ntifor's leg. After it metamorphosed into a kind of nodule under the skin with a fluctuancy provoking a catch-me-if-you-can game, it didn't burst. It literally split open. It was as if the nodule, tired of playing its game, stood still for a moment, rested, looked to the left and to the right and seeing no one, came out to see a bit of the world by splitting the skin surface with a blast. It also didn't release pus like a boil should have. The seasoned herbalist who had been attending to Ntifor was completely lost for words. "Can you please let me know the name of this game you are playing with me?" he cried to the gods inside his head. Then muttered aloud to Ntifor, "I must employ new herbs."

He cleaned the surface of the sore, placed on the new herbal paste and tied it in place with a clean strip of calico. He told Ntifor when to report back. When Ntifor, who was beginning to walk with difficulty, left his treatment hut, the seasoned herbalist took a most difficult decision. If on his next visit, Ntifor's sore showed no sign of healing, he would insist that Ntifor visit the hospital.

The teacher who was doing the research work with Ntifor was waiting for him on his return from the herbalist. Ntifor was in pain and he made this known to her. His boil had burst, he explained.

The teacher divulged that, in fact, she had not come for their usual discussion. "It came to my notice that a prophet went to a radio station in Accra called harvest FM with a prophecy about the affliction in your leg!" she divulged, casting an interesting look at Ntifor's bandaged leg.

Ntifor asked her if she recalled how he pointed it out to her the first time she came to him.

She remembered.

"Then, it was a small boil. Now it is something else," Ntifor told her.

"So did you hear about the prophecy?" the teacher asked again.

"My wives had heard it for some time now from a man here we call Papa Driver. They told me about it when my son in Takoradi came visiting. But really, what can we do except wait and see!" he shrugged.

The teacher said, "Actually because I happened to be conducting this research work with you, when I heard about it...and don't ask me how because it is a long story...I felt obliged to pursue the claim. So in fact, I went looking for the prophet."

"You did? And did you find him?" Ntifor asked anxiously.

"Yes."

Ntifor was impressed. "Did he say anything? How did I come into it? I really don't understand the whole thing. My wives and I have been living here quietly all this while, now suddenly this. It is baffling."

"Do you need anything?" Mena Kakraba barged into their

conversation. Ntifor didn't even see her approaching. Kakraba had adopted that strategy of going over to them at the least possible opportunity without being summoned, to ask if Ntifor needed anything. She was suspicious of the teacher and barging frequently into their tête-à-tête was her way of establishing this to the teacher.

Ntifor sensed it. "Kakraba," Ntifor responded, "You are always extra concerned about my imaginary needs whenever the teacher comes around," he quipped, "I hope that you will continue to be at my beck and call without a frown and show up by my side even when I haven't called after the teacher leaves." He laughed.

An unperturbed Kakraba replied, "I'll check on you again when I think that you need something," she said and eyed the teacher rudely before walking away.

The teacher ignored her and resumed her conversation with Ntifor.

"Did you find out anything?" Penyin asked when Kakraba joined her in the kitchen.

"Nothing, Penyin, nothing. But the way she has captured his attention, it is like she has done something to him, Penyin," Kakraba moaned.

Penyin smiled. She knew their husband was fond of the teacher. What man his age getting such undivided attention from a woman half his age wouldn't be? Penyin was convinced that no intimacy was developing between their husband and the teacher. "Kakraba she has done nothing to him."

Kakraba shook her head. "But there is a closeness between them. Maybe forged out of a fascination our husband has for her. But she is... I don't know Penyin. Something is just not right. What I feel is no longer jealousy. It is a worry. I am worried about what she really wants from him. It is not his love. I know that now. But

she wants something, something deeper, even sinister.”

“Oh Kakraba!” Penyin remained unconvinced, “Are you not stretching things too far?”

The teacher stayed with Ntifor for a while longer. Penyin and Kakraba didn’t even realize when she left.

In the evening, Ntifor only fidgeted with the supper Penyin served him. Penyin returned to Kakraba and said, “I am beginning to think that maybe you didn’t stretch things too far Kakraba. He hardly ate his food.”

The following dawn Ntifor summoned Kakraba. Penyin observed them at a distance. She watched Kakraba take the seat their husband offered her and listen attentively to whatever it was he was telling her. Suddenly Kakraba sprang up from her seat. Then a bizarre scene began to unfold. Kakraba shouted and struck her belly through her clothing with her right palm. The self-inflicted pain was obviously fighting the tears that were threatening to flow. Then she ripped off the cover cloth tied around her waist and let it fall to her feet. She shoved it aside with her right foot and stood there in her wrapper cloth and kaba blouse. Ntifor bowed down his head. He refused to look at her.

“Ntifor!” Kakraba screamed, “Ntifor, I said that if you are a real man, raise your head and look at me.”

Ntifor ignored her. He turned his face away. Anger shot through Kakraba like an arrow. She grabbed her kaba blouse and wrenched it off her body. Her wrinkled belly lay bare. Deep creases and huge folds. Skin robbed of its elasticity through years of protrusions from the containment of new growing lives. Excess skin created with nowhere to go.

“Look!” Kakraba wailed and hit her belly again, “I said look!”

She didn’t fight back the tears this time. She allowed them to

flow and caught her lower lip between her teeth. The pain in her belly was excruciating. She tasted fresh blood as her teeth sank into the softness of the lower edge of her mouth. She wailed like an injured animal. Ntifor's head shot up as if to a command. The sight of blood on Kakraba's lips released dampness through his pores. Kakraba's adrenalin soared at the profuse sweat pouring down his face. Her eyes glittered, possessed by her anger. She whacked her palm across her belly again. The force of it nearly sent her reeling back. She sobbed aloud.

Ntifor couldn't take it any longer. "Stop it Kakraba, please! Please stop it!" he pleaded quietly like silence.

Kakraba released the bloodied lip from between her teeth and sucked on the fresh wound. She spat out the bloody saliva and grinned triumphantly. The grisliness of her bloodstained mouth, spiced up her mood for war.

"You want me to stop? Really? Ntifor!" she hollered, "Do you really want me to stop? Then take a look at me. Take a very good look at me. Have you really ever taken a good look at my crumpled belly before? Count the creases upon its surface Ntifor. This is the belly that made you a father several times over. Look at it! Look at it Ntifor! And while you repeat what you just told me, count the folds and creases! Look!"

Ntifor began to weep.

Kakraba turned and headed away from him. Penyin rushed to meet her mid way. "Kakraba!" she cried hysterically, "What was all that about? Look at all the blood. What is happening?"

Kakraba replied in an ice cold tone, "Our husband is talking about something he is calling 'sacrament'."

"What?" Penyin yelled.

"The teacher brought him a message from that prophet they say had a revelation about the affliction on his leg,"

“The teacher again?”

“She told him the prophet said the swelling was the work of the devil, so our husband must get baptized immediately and receive Holy Communion.”

Penyin was baffled beyond words, “That is what would heal his leg?”

“According to the teacher as alleged by the prophet, yes,” Kakraba sniffed.

Penyin still didn’t get it. If all that the teacher did was to bring a message to their husband from the prophet about how his leg could be healed, then why was Kakraba so upset about it?

She asked Kakraba.

Kakraba stopped in her step and said, “The sacrament that our husband supposedly requires, comes at a price.”

Penyin frowned, becoming more confused.

Kakraba resumed walking, then stopped again. She wiped her face and cleared her throat. “According to the teacher, the prophet said our husband must be baptized to enable him to receive the Communion which would then deal spiritually with the demon responsible for the sore.”

Penyin still didn’t understand the big deal. “So?”

Kakraba stopped walking. She was suddenly drained of every emotion. Her words came out flat and bland. “Our husband must be accepted into the prophet’s church before he can be baptized. But before he can be baptized into the church, our husband must repent from his sins. And one of his sins according to the teacher, is this marriage.”

Now she gained Penyin’s complete attention. “This marriage? Our marriage?” Penyin yelled.

“Yes Penyin!” Kakraba muttered quietly.

“This marriage is sin?” Penyin wailed on as if she had suddenly

been struck mad, “This marriage of over forty years is sin? What nonsense is that? How is this marriage a sin?”

Now it was Penyin who was out of control and Kakraba who was in control of herself. She spoke like one who had resigned herself to life. Like one who had lost everything and had no fear any more because she had nothing more to lose. “The two of us, Penyin, you and I, this polygynous marriage, that is the sin, because of which our husband cannot receive the sacrament. The sacrament that will deal with the demon that is responsible for his sore. So he must absolve himself of the sin.”

It was as if Kakraba had handed over the baton of rage to Penyin. “Absolve himself of the sin? This marriage is sin?” Penyin screeched

“Yes Penyin! Our husband is to send me away back to my father’s family. After over four decades of marriage, I am to pack myself out of this marriage like a piece of unwanted cloth, if I want our husband’s leg to heal.”

Penyin trembled with the fury that consumed her. “Our husband had the audacity to tell you that to your face?” she spat.

Kakraba nodded slowly. “It’s my dilemma Penyin. See? If I want his leg to heal then I must pack my things and return to my father’s household. If I don’t leave and his leg doesn’t heal, it is I who will be blamed. That is my predicament.”

Penyin was beside herself with rage. “I am going to see Ntifor. Then if I have to travel to Accra to go and seek out the teacher and that prophet, I will. Do they think that because they are in the capital city and we are here they can come and tell us what to do and how to live our lives? I will have a few questions for that prophet. If I don’t get those answers then the Almighty God Himself will have to grant me audience. An urgent one, face to face if possible.”

That brought a smile to Kakraba's lips. She called Penyin who had already swung round and was heading to Ntifer.

"Don't attempt to change my mind Kakraba!" Penyin warned.

"You mean about your face to face talk with the Almighty God?" Kakraba quipped.

They both roared with laughter.

Then Kakraba said seriously, "I'll send for our daughter Penyin. I was already intending to discuss it with you. I'll go to the station right away to see Papa Driver or leave a message. Let's wait for her to come before we do anything else. I will let them inform her that it is very urgent."

"Good!" Penyin agreed with Kakraba, "I think that the teacher will also be returning to find out about how ready our husband is to receive the sacrament."

"Then we will be waiting for her too!" Kakraba added.

Penyin took Kakraba's hand and steered her towards the kitchen.

Chapter Seventeen

5TH WIFE LAY in bed. She had been doing that a lot, lying in bed and contemplating. There was so much in her head, so much about herself and about one of her rivals that she couldn't divulge. So much that felt like splitting her head in two at times. Many often wondered why she chose to marry Pesewa. Many concluded she did it just for the money. Only she knew the situation in which she had been. And only she knew that marrying Pesewa was the only option that she had. The need of some women to become attached to and to become someone's wife is sometimes grossly under-rated and under estimated. In marrying Pesewa, she did become attached, albeit one of many wives, but it still qualified her to take on the title of wife; someone to whom a man was married. And it brought to an end that living hell of having to constantly deal with those unscrupulous men, many of whom had left their own respective wives sitting lonely at home, to come and harass her in their search for the adventure of living out their fantasies with a middle-aged single woman. Men who defined 'single' as synonymous with 'lonely' and thus 'available'. Their approaches were always insulting, as if the poor lonely single middle-aged woman, that they saw her to be, should be grateful to them for even making a pass at her.

By marrying Pesewa, she had also rid herself of the pressure to produce children. Had she produced a child for Pesewa, she knew he would have been elated. But it hadn't been one of his priorities. He had made enough children to fill a village already.

Now he had her, and that was what mattered. She once tested him to find out if he was disappointed about her failure to bear him a child. He laughed. "Why are you laughing?" she asked.

"I may eventually have had to become jealous of our child," he said, "because it would have come to split your attention for me."

She had hugged him tight.

Only she knew what she had gone through at the age of eighteen. She was in secondary school and had fallen head over heels in love with a fellow student. Their first unprotected sex got her pregnant. She was shocked. How could that have happened? They only did it that once! No one told her that a girl could get pregnant if she did it just once! Just once?

Only her mother found out. She suspected it in her third month and confronted her about it. Her father never found out. He would have killed her and gone to give himself up to the police for killing his own daughter with his bare hands. Her mother became her best ally in crime. She sent her off to an aunt in another town where the pregnancy was terminated. The doctor diagnosed an ectopic pregnancy. Further complications crept in because she also turned out to be severely anaemic. With the fetus growing inside her fallopian tubes, the pregnancy would have had to be terminated anyway. Her mother signed the papers of consent. Then something inexplicable happened during the surgery. Instead of severing the one fallopian tube in which the fetus was developing, both were severed. She only found this out several years later. She had no idea why that happened. And she didn't want to pursue it for her own sake and her mother's. Her parents were old. What would it do to her father to know at that age that his wife and his daughter connived to do something like that and to keep it from him for all these years? And what would

it have done to the doctor's reputation? After all hadn't her mother given her consent to it with her signature?

Marrying Pesewa inevitably brought her the additional bonus of material comfort. But she paid a price for it, by becoming a part of his polygynous brood. And thinking about it, she shuddered. She knew what saved her. It was her insistence on the use of a condom. As the youngest wife and his favorite one, she had enough hold on him to dare to demand and insist on the use of a condom. None of the other four wives could have dared to make and insist upon such a demand. Pesewa would have deemed it an unpardonable insult. A defamation. This was a society where the use of a condom was the man's prerogative. Over bottles of drinks, men would joke about how they used it with that girl or the other because they didn't trust her but didn't use it with another girl because, as for her, she could be trusted. And when it came to the marital home, why should they consider the use of condom at all? Where else could they go at it 'raw' if not with their marriage partners? The situation was dicey enough even with the man having the prerogative over its use. But as the favorite wife, and for as long as she remained that, pending the arrival of a possible sixth wife, 5th Wife stood by her demand that Pesewa use it.

Pesewa had been shocked the first time. He had felt so insulted and demeaned by it that he had left his 5th Wife's bedroom in the flat he had rented for her and spent the night in another room. He had left the following dawn without a good-bye and had wasted the breakfast she had carefully prepared for him. Three days later he returned to her. By then, she had devised a new strategy to induce him to use the condom without feeling insulted. Unlike the first time when she had demanded it outright, this time she took her time till his resolve was at its lowest ebb. Then instead of leaving the task of wearing it to him, she took over that duty

gladly and incorporated it into the whole act. Still, she didn't lose guard. She never underestimated the weight of her victory in getting her husband to willingly use the condom and remained conscious of not overstretching his compromise. She knew he would never walk to any counter anywhere and ask to buy a condom. Nor would he send any of his drivers or messengers or sons. The fact that he was using it with her did not mean he didn't care about being seen or it becoming known that he was using it. 5th Wife dealt with that too by taking over the purchasing of it. And she ensured a regular and generous supply. But she didn't stop there. She also kept some female condoms on hand which as she had suspected could happen and anticipated, proved crucially useful when Pesewa got into that 'men-thing' mood and refused to use it one occasion. She saw it as a phase, a fleeting need to re-assert what to his mind was his control over her, having lost it by allowing himself to be talked into the use of condoms by her. She saw it coming. Wives had attested to it both privately and publicly. So she was prepared for it. She didn't fight with him over it. She simply smiled demurely and excused herself to go to the bathroom. She returned to bed with a Madonna smile and a little surprise.

"What is the world coming to?" Pesewa wailed weakly, "Condoms for women too?"

But he knew and accepted finally that when it came to his 5th Wife that was how intimacy was going to be. If he didn't wear a condom, she would.

It was the only reason why she was negative while her four older rivals were all carrying the AIDS virus.

The saga cast her mind back onto something that she had seen during the very early period of her hiding and well before her programme with Sylv on his GMG show. She was meeting with

Muff at the grill bar at the restaurant of a hotel on the outskirts of Accra. She was dressed as a man with a fake beard and moustache. The hotel was a place that anyone seeking optimal privacy would go to. That was why she and Muff met there. And that was why the receding back view of the two people she saw as she emerged from the back of the hotel astounded her. She had gone to the washroom. Dressed as a man, she couldn't use the ladies room. And what was she to do if she went to stand over the basin in the men's room?

It had to be one of those situations dictated by fate.

She kept her suspicion to herself. Who would have listened to her or believed her? And was she sure what she thought she had seen was what she really had seen?

Her course of thinking changed after the test results of her four older rivals. Was that the solution to the puzzle?

Her thoughts reverted to her late husband.

Oh Pesewa!

Taking his own life because he couldn't live with his condition. A fine man. A wealthy man. Envied by many. He got into his luxurious bed one night knowing he had elected to end his life, stared at a concoction of pills he had piled into his hand, emptied them into his mouth and sent them down into his body with water from a fine glass with a gold rim. Then he carefully placed the glass on his marble top bedside locker, stretched out his body, which was clad in fine smooth silk pyjamas and waited for death. What were his last thoughts? Was there a brief moment of regret after he had gulped down the pills? A reconsideration of the act when it was too late to reverse the process? Who could have envisaged the AIDS virus anywhere near a household like Pesewa's mansion? Didn't the virus have its territory? Wasn't it known to roam around the Nkrumah Circle among those low

class prostitutes? And in those overcrowded ghettos? But in a posh mansion situated in such a posh area of Accra with diplomats and World Bank officials as neighbors? What business did the virus have there?

Inside the servants' quarters in the Pesewa compound, where they were all secluded, first wife examined the new growth of hair sprouting on her head. Until their test results, no hair had been allowed the chance to sprout on their heads. A woman's hair was her adornment, the crown of her beauty. And since a married woman adorned herself only for her husband, if the husband died, she owed it to his memory to be shorn of that symbol of her adornment for a period to signify her deep mourning for him. Until the result of their test, all four of them willingly submitted themselves to have their hair shaved. Suddenly the zealous barber who had been gleefully shaving them had stayed away without reason. The number of people entering the quarters had reduced drastically. The servants who brought them their food wouldn't look into their faces. The fear of the disease was more destructive than the disease itself.

Speculations gingered it all up the more.

There was talk of someone having given Pesewa juju and imparted the AIDS virus to him spiritually, with which he then went on to infect his wives.

Another made the claim of a curse invoked upon Pesewa prior to his taking on his fifth wife, which explained why only she escaped the virus.

A man claiming to be a herbalist, from God knows where, came knocking on the gate of the mansion one dawn claiming to have a cure for AIDS. He had run out of the herbs for the potion, he claimed. The herbs could only be obtained in a forest reserve in

the Congo. If he was given the money, he was willing to travel to the Congo to obtain the herbs to cure the four widows.

A fetish priest claiming to have had some training in South Africa also came knocking. His was the most bizarre of all the remedies. The four widows should be made to sleep with a black male pig, he ordered. He went on rather audaciously to compare his ritual to the casting out of the demons into a horde of pigs by Jesus. According to him, after the four widows had slept with the black pig, the evil spirit of the AIDS virus would leave their bodies and enter that of the pig.

“Then what?” he was asked.

“Then what, what?” he asked back.

“After the AIDS virus had left the four women and entered the black pig what then?”

“Oh!” beamed the witchdoctor, “I shall personally roast the black pig alive.”

“Where? At the mansion?” he was asked.

“Oh no!” he shrieked, “At my shrine. Some rituals will have to be performed before the black pig can be roasted.”

“What happens to the pork then?” he was asked.

“It will be offered to the gods!” he replied.

“Really? The AIDS infected pork? Don’t the gods deserve something better?”

He bolted.

While the family cracked their heads about how all this had happened, the family head summoned Pesewa’s eldest son.

“I need you to go to the mortuary where your father is. We need some of his hair and nails.”

Then he requested one of Pesewa’s favorite kente cloths and cut off a small piece. He placed the hair and nail pieces into the small piece of kente cloth, tied it up and placed it inside a small gourd.

“Initially we all blamed your fifth wife for infecting you with the virus,” the family head spoke into the small gourd, “Now none of us know for sure what exactly happened. Upon the demand of your fifth wife’s family head, your four older wives were compelled to also submit to the tests. This was to enable the truth about your fifth wife’s innocence to be established beyond doubt and communicated to your spirit. Now we ask of you to guide us to the truth of what really happened.”

He covered the mouth of the gourd with a small piece of white cloth and tied it at the neck with a string of dried raffia. In the middle of that night the family head picked the gourd up and went out behind the mansion. Under an avocado pear tree, which was one of Pesewa’s favorite fruits, he dug a small hole and buried the gourd with its contents. For the following three days, he rose each dawn to the spot and poured one whole bottle of schnapps on the spot, invoking both Pesewa’s spirit and that of the good ancestors to lead the family to the truth. Pesewa was polygamous, but he was known to be faithful to his wives. All of his wives attested to it that he slept with them only after he had married them.

The gossip paper, T&T, had even speculated once that Pesewa’s faithfulness to his wives was a condition set by a fetish that was responsible for his wealth. He was never to sleep with a woman he wasn’t married to. So how did he get the disease that led him to end his life so tragically?

On the fourth day, Pesewa’s family head sent a message to the fifth wife’s family head.

“Do you recall the promise that I made to you when you sent a delegation to explain the fear of your lineage and clan, and the need to communicate the truth about your daughter not having infected our son with the virus to his spirit? Did I not keep my

promise and compel our son's other four wives to also get tested? So from the same lips that kept that promise comes this new message. While the four widows are in isolation, with everyone afraid to go near them, can we humbly ask you to intercede and ask your daughter to come out of hiding? We have acknowledged that when your daughter didn't want to be found, she knew what to do and succeeded. So now we are entreating her to come out of hiding. I am giving you my word that not a hair on her head will be touched. Not a finger will be raised against her. Those who wanted to force her into a levirate marriage with her late husband's brother have been silenced by the turn of events. It is unbecoming to the memory of our late honourable son that at gatherings, no one is even prepared to acknowledge the existence of his four widows. So great is the fear of this mysterious virus that has no known cure. It is as if everyone fears that the sheer mention or appearance of the four widows could automatically transmit the virus to them by a remote control of a sort. We need the physical presence of your daughter to redeem and honour our son's memory."

Chapter Eighteen

THE FIRST WIFE was a young Christian convert when she met and fell head over heels in love with the young farm hand Pesewa. Together they dreamt about a future that would be filled with everlasting love, children and the comforts of life. Other wives were never envisaged.

Inside the quarters where they had been isolated, first wife sought solace and strength in her Bible. It energized her enough to be able to try and comfort her third and fourth rivals who had resorted to a daily ritual of tears from dawn to dusk.

To first wife, suicide was sinful. A crime against God the Creator of the world who had planned every single being's duration on earth. God alone, having created man from dust and breathed life into him had the right and authority to end that life. The ending of his own life was an interruption of God's plan, a disruption of the order of the universe. His soul therefore needed to be forgiven to enable it find rest. By virtue of her faith, first wife deemed herself Pesewa's only true wife, and the only one qualified to pray for him and ask for that forgiveness of his soul by God. Her church supported her. It regarded and acknowledged only her as their late husband's wife, being the only one who ever enjoyed a monogamous relationship with him. The rest were intruders, the second wife being the one with the heaviest load of sin because it was her entry into the then monogamous marriage that turned it into a polygynous one. The three younger ones only came to add to an already existing polygynous situation.

First wife took a seat in one corner of the living room and stared out at the main mansion which she had once occupied with her husband. Each of her three immediate younger rivals had their respective living quarters downstairs, with each of the quarters complete with kitchen, toilet, bathroom, bedroom and a living room. Their husband honoured her as the first wife by assigning her living quarters upstairs where he also had his. She was the only one who had witnessed the poor farm hand's first drops of sweat, the farm hand who was later to become their now wealthy husband. Now by a cruel twist of fate, she had been reduced to simply one of the wives, and infected with the AIDS virus. It hurt.

Her immediate rival the second wife, passed on her way to the bathroom. They ignored each other. There was something about that woman, first wife pondered. She stared at her back till the bathroom door closed behind her.

The notion existed that it always took a certain kind of woman to agree to become the second wife when such traditional conditions as the infertility of the first wife was not the reason. She is the one who holds the unenviable trophy of having transformed a monogamous marriage into a polygynous one.

Pesewa's second wife used to be a very close friend of the first wife. When first wife, then the only wife, began to suspect that her husband was seeing another woman, it was to her very close friend that she went to discuss the matter. And when the tears wanted to flow, it was upon the shoulders of her close friend that she cried. And as she did, her close friend held her close, rubbed her back and comforted her, as a close friend should. Then came the day that Pesewa summoned his only wife and announced his intention to take on a second wife and asked her to name what she would want for compensation.

“Your honour as your first wife,” she replied solemnly.

It shocked Pesewa and left him dumbfounded. But it didn't change what he had set his heart and mind on doing. He brought home his chosen new additional wife. And as the sight of her the tears of his first wife froze with shock. Her new rival was the very same woman she had gone crying to when she had got to know that her days as the only wife had finally come to a halt. She sought solace in her faith.

Pesewa never made secret of his absolute belief in the Omnipotent God as the Creator of the world. Nevertheless, he never missed a chance to make known his stance on the Christian faith of his first wife. “After all that the white people have done to us black people on this earth, I should entrust my accessibility to God through another white man?” he would say as if joking but meaning every word of it.

She knew right from the onset that he would never marry her in church. But it was her faith that carried her through when she was made to sit next to her once very close friend and be reminded of her duty to stay on good terms with her now as co-wife. It was her faith that gave her the strength to promise to care for her co-wife if she should fall sick and make the children that her co-wife would bear with their husband hers as well.

The first time Pesewa retired to his bedroom with his second wife, who for that moment was his favorite and more desired wife, it was the faith of first wife that got her down on her knees in front of her bed to pray to God to expand her vessel of endurance. She prayed to God as if she was talking to Him face to face. “I married him to be in a lasting relationship with him, God,” she wept. “I love him. I will love him forever and had hoped that he too would love me the same. I still hope to spend my life with him forever, no matter how poor the quality. If he demands it,

be it out of want and passion for me or simply to fulfill his duty to me as a husband, I will share intimacy with him. To whatever degree that is possible, I will strive to maintain my attraction and closeness to him as I did years ago when he was only a farm hand. I was full of hope when he made me his wife. When I wanted to be intimate and he didn't, I accepted it without qualms because I had no reason to feel he neither wanted nor desired me. Now I have a new pain that I am going to have to learn to bear. The pain of knowing he didn't want intimacy with me because he desired another. Please God, expand my vessel of endurance, so that I can bear that pain of his want for this other woman to whom he has legitimized his right to desire, so that as I promised before all who once gathered, I will be able to smile at this one time close friend of mine who is now my rival, even in the morning of knowing that she shared his bed in the night. The prospect of sharing him is painful, God. It hurts. Please show me mercy and kill this pain inside me, God, so that I will stop feeling it. Whatever time he used to have available for me will be divided from now on. Please God, have mercy on me to endure this loss without many tears."

God heard the prayer of the first wife and enlarged her vessel of endurance. She survived. For one thing, the reign of the favorite wife in a polygynous marriage is always like a passport. It expires.

The conversion of a monogamous marriage to a polygynous one, might take a bit longer. But once the threshold of polygyny is crossed, taking on additional wives or mistresses or concubines, the marriage turns into a downhill flow.

Second wife learnt that when Pesewa announced his intention of taking on wife number three.

"How would you want me to compensate you?" he asked his second wife.

“A shop!” she declared. “A large shop.”

She got her large and well-stocked shop.

By nature an aggressive and ambitious woman, she put her whole body and soul into her business. It fulfilled her and gave her such sense of power that she even began to dread the days that her husband would summon her to his bedroom. Gradually a kind of emotional osmosis began to manifest itself. An in and out flow. A loss of endearment to the husband she shared with two other women added to the gain of the intoxicating power that her social and financial freedom and independence from her successful trading business gave her.

The initial loathing she had harboured for their husband's third wife turned into indifference. Her jealousy waned and shrank. By the time it got to the turn of the third wife to do her crying with the arrival of their husband's fourth wife, the second wife had successfully effected an emotional detachment from the marital circle of Pesewa and the four of them as a unit. He ceased to affect her. She continued to be one of his four wives only in the physical. When he demanded her presence in his bed, she obliged dutifully like a soldier summoned to war. She began to look forward to getting out of his bedroom fast. Life on the emotional outskirts of the marital circle felt good. Her emotional detachment from it felt powerful. Sometimes she would take up an observation post outside the circle with glee and watch the three other wives still caught inside it.

Soon, the inevitable temptation reared its head. It must have been lingering in her subconscious to catapult into her conscious mind with the kind of speed it did. She sensed him even before she caught his eye. He seemed to have come into her shop on purpose to gain her attention. It was in the way he lingered about. And he came to the shop every day.

The thought shocked and scared her initially. Then gradually the defenses began to crumble till she began to compare it all with her shop assistants. She was paying them. She had in effect bought their services. And what about the goods in her shop? She bought those too. She could buy goods and services and pay well, so why not a good sexual life too?

She slipped her mobile phone number to him the next day he came lingering in the shop. By now it had become obvious that he wanted to gain her attention. It was the start of their blossoming purely cash for sex affair.

Initially he described himself as a businessman. It didn't take her long to figure out what business it was he was into. His target group was wealthy and sexually unfulfilled middle-aged women. There were thousands of them out there, both single and married. It was good business. He was sinfully good-looking and yet to strike thirty. He would do this 'job' for a couple more years then quit and go into a more legitimate business. He had it all figured out. As the service provider, his was to make excellent and satisfactory deliveries, which he trusted he did because so far not one single client had complained. And for those poor starved middle-aged woman, theirs was to pay well. Emotions were kept strictly at bay. It was good business.

Then he caught the true young love of his life one evening alighting from the car of an older man who was not a relative. And his world fell apart. He confronted her.

"Who was that?" he stormed.

"A family acquaintance!" she replied.

"And what did you have to do with him?"

She looked him straight in the eye and muttered, "It's a critical family matter."

He had a rendezvous that day with the big shop owner. And

for the first time in all the time they had been together, he broke the cardinal rule of his business. He became emotional and broke down while with a client.

She remained very patient with him and asked him the cause of his distress. He told the shop owner the truth. He had a serious girlfriend who was a student at the university and whom he had just caught alighting from the car of her sugar daddy.

The shop owner burst out laughing. It didn't surprise him. Were he to be her, he would also have laughed. There he was with his sugar mummy in a hotel on the outskirts of Accra, all upset and distraught because he had caught his steady girlfriend with her sugar daddy?

For an odd reason, that was the recollection that occupied the second wife as she sat on the WC in the bathroom of the servants' quarters. When their late husband's sisters came and sacked them from the main mansion where each widow had remained confined to her own quarters, the excuse they gave was that their confinement in the servants' quarters was part of their widowhood purification rites. But they all knew it was because of their HIV status. And for her, confined there under one roof with three of her rivals was a drastic and vicious plunge back into the marital circle she had so carefully and successfully detached herself from. It made her feel powerless. News of her HIV status had driven away even the most loyal of her customers. It was as if her goods had also been infected or that the virus could be transmitted to them by their sheer entry into her shop. Many had decided: why go and buy from a shop whose owner had the AIDS virus, when the same could be purchased at the same price from a nearby shop whose owner had not been found to have the virus? Even some of her former sales girls who had left her employment were

being refused employment in other shops.

She leaned back and pondered. First wife has been observing her with eyes that went beyond deep. As for her two younger rivals, they were too busy crying to think straight. Yet the gnawing thought. Could she have been responsible for all this? Could she have been the one who became infected and transferred it to their husband who also went on to infect the other wives? How many other sugar mummies did her lover have? Or among the wives, was she the only one having paid sex outside the marriage? How about the third and fourth wives? Hell! Why not even first wife, Bible, faith and all? She did suffer some bouts of persistent feverish pains and headaches, but who doesn't? How long ago was it? They had lasted for about two weeks and stopped. That much she remembered. But how long ago? And didn't people suffer these conditions sometimes? But not as persistently as she did?

Her lover was so good-looking and so strong. How could he be carrying the virus? Didn't people who had it lose a lot of weight? Is that not what they said?

She sighed.

If only she could see him. But now it was impossible.

Even after their husband's death, she had been able to sneak out of the house to meet him. It was that grand family meeting that spoilt everything and started her hell. It was after that meeting that her representative there came to report that the 5th Wife's family head sent a two-man delegation to demand that the truth be established and told to their late husband's spirit before his burial. Had it not been for that, their family head would not have compelled the four of them to go for the test. Then all this suffering and humiliation would not have begun.

Damn 5th Wife's family head.

Damn 5th Wife. Damn!

Chapter Nineteen

THE SEASONED HERBALIST, Opanin, didn't allow anyone to remain around when he undid the strip of cloth covering Ntifer's sore. It was his usual practise with cases he deemed dire. But that day more than any other, Opanin had never felt more thankful for this stance, because what he saw of the sore beneath the strip of cloth, shook him so badly that but for the experienced herbalist that he was, he would have shrunk with shock. What boil hadn't he treated before? What sore hadn't he healed with his potent herbs before? But whatever this thing was that had afflicted Ntifer's leg, must have come from beyond the earth. It could only be a spiritual attack manifesting in the physical.

Not only was the strange sore defying the efficacy of his herbs and expanding in spite of it, but the flesh of the affected area also appeared to be devouring itself ravenously with glee. Ntifer's eyes watered at the sight of the devastation to his once healthy and good-looking leg. "My wives were right," he whispered. "They told me right from the onset that it wasn't a boil."

The herbalist summoned his entire energy to maintain a calm face and keep his hands steady as he proceeded to clean the surface of the bloody jagged sore.

"Opanin," Ntifer called.

The herbalist raised his head and looked at him. He held himself in check but failed to erase the clouded expression on his face.

"It's not healing, is it?" Ntifer asked.

The herbalist proceeded to flatten some herbal paste. He replied

slowly. "There are evil people around Ntifor, who do evil things. Where your leg is concerned, the target could be you or me."

"You?" Ntifor was astounded.

Opanin chuckled bitterly. "Even in the midst of herbalists, there are evil ones. Such an evil one who desires to humiliate me and destroy my reputation may choose to target the efficacy of my herbs and render them impotent."

Ntifor shook his head in disagreement. "In this case I can assure you that the efficacy of your herbs is not the target."

"No?"

"No. Because a prophet with ears reaching way up to Heaven saw this affliction."

"Where?"

"In Accra."

"An Accra prophet?" Opanin quipped in spite of his sadness. "I thought you were going to say Jerusalem."

Ntifor didn't laugh. "Opanin, he had never seen me before. I was completely unknown to him. Yet God revealed my condition to him."

He narrated the whole episode to Opanin who listened in complete silence. When Ntifor had finished, Opanin asked cautiously. "Was the reason for your affliction also revealed to the prophet?"

"Indirectly, yes," Ntifor replied.

"Indirectly?"

"Yes. I mean not directly..."

"Which is the same as indirectly," Opanin cut in suspiciously.

Ntifor sighed. "What I want to say is that, not exactly."

"No?" Opanin frowned. "Then it's odd."

"Odd? Why?" Ntifor asked.

“It is odd because from the little that I know of the Almighty God, mortals as we beings on earth are, it is normally made known to us why we are being struck dead or with a suffering like your affliction. Of course the prophet must know more, but...”

“He did say something!” Ntifor cut short Opanin, “My two wives. He said I was living in sin. Living with two wives was living in sin. Before him, someone also told me the same thing.”

“About your two wives and sin?”

“Yes.”

To Ntifor’s dismay, Opanin roared with laughter. “The prophet, did he also say something about men with one wife and several concubines? If your two wives are a sin, how about my seven wives?”

“Opanin!” Ntifor exclaimed, “Your wives are now seven? I thought they were five.”

Opanin laughed gaily, sore and pain forgotten for a moment. “They were, till I fell for another and wanted to make her my sixth. But she was one of a set of twins and I was told to either take them both or leave them both.”

“Zero or two? Who will take zero?” Ntifor giggled.

“See?” Opanin asked and roared with renewed laughter.

Fresh pains in the leg made Ntifor stop laughing. He said seriously, “Actually I don’t think I am being punished by God for having two wives. What the prophet meant was that I could be healed but the healing could take place only upon my receipt of the sacrament. And I cannot be administered the sacrament while I remain non-baptized. Yet no church will baptize me while I continue to have two wives.”

Opanin was flabbergasted. “Who told you all this?”

Ntifor launched into another long episode about the teacher and about Kakraba’s emotionally churning reaction.

Opanin began tearing up the strips of cloth for the sore. "Is she not out to sow a seed of discord in your household?" he asked carefully.

Ntifor was shocked. "The teacher?"

"Yes." Opanin replied, "You knew her from nowhere. She came to you out of the blue with a claim. She made it rather too enthusiastically her business to go looking for the prophet. And don't forget this Ntifor: you never heard the claims about your wives directly from the prophet. It was solely through the teacher. When a chief or a family head has an important message to deliver, he doesn't send just anyone with it. Especially not someone who happened to go looking for him because she was doing research work with you. How much more a message from God as the prophet claimed. A message can be wrongly delivered. That is why the messengers of chiefs go through rigorous training in the deliverance of messages. One wrong word and a war can be sparked. And it is not the messenger who will carry the blame but the chief. Ntifor, if according to the prophet, he received the message about you not from a mortal chief or family head but the immortal Omnipotent God, do you really believe that if he is a prophet worth his salt, he would send the divine solution to your ailment through a teacher who just happened to be connected to you?"

Ntifor started.

"Think about it carefully," Opanin advised as he proceeded to tie the sore. "Or better still, consider this option. Tell the teacher to relay to the prophet that I, your herbalist, who began to treat this sore like a boil till it turned into what it has now become, would want to meet him, so that together we can find out from God why your own flesh appears to be eating itself up so rapidly this way."

Ntifor remained silent.

Opanin went on. "If this is a spiritual attack that has manifested itself this way in the physical, doesn't it follow that it must be dealt with both physically and spiritually?"

Ntifor still didn't speak.

"I didn't become the herbalist that I am today out of nothing," Opanin resumed talking. "The knowledge was handed down to me by my forefathers. So I will consult them about this sore. If the knowledge they handed down to me and which I am applying is not having the positive result of healing you, the dishonor of failure that befalls me, befalls them too. So I will cry unto them. If it is the efficacy of the herbs that is being spiritually attacked, then they should deal with the attacker. They should identify him and deal with him. If it is the retribution of a wrong you Ntifor have done, then they should reveal it to me. But all this is a battle in the spirit. The physical fight still remains. I have applied fresh herbs. I know this herb like the back of my hand. It should have begun to heal your sore a long time ago. So let's see what it will do. But did you say any of your children are coming down to visit?"

"Yes," Ntifor ended his silence, "My daughter. The very one in Accra about whom the prophet received his revelation about me."

"Good Ntifor. Good!" Opanin declared.

Ntifor searched Opanin's face. Silence ensued. Opanin appeared occupied with some thoughts. Ntifor noticed his facial muscles continually twitch. Then he blurted out suddenly, "As I said about the physical, this is what I suggest Ntifor," and shifted uncomfortably. "As the honest and truthful herbalist that I am and with great difficulty as this indirectly amounts to an admission that my herbs alone have so far failed to deal with your ailment in the physical..." He paused.

Ntifor suspected what he was about to be told but remained quiet. He understood the difficulty Opanin was undergoing. He waited patiently.

Opanin's head shot up. He rested his eyes directly upon Ntifor's face. "On the immediate arrival of you daughter, please, in the name of the same one God whose face we all seek but never see and upon the honor of my forefathers whose knowledge about the herbs of this world has relieved many of their suffering, please, let your...hm..." his voice failed him.

Ntifor said calmly, "I'll follow whatever advice you give me Opanin."

Opanin looked Ntifor in the eye. "Let your daughter send you to the hospital."

She was headed home on a bus to her parents in their hometown, but her whole mind was still in Accra, on Idan and Destine, who was Randa and whose scent used to invade her bedroom. Her scent no longer trailed Idan, which could only mean one of two possibilities. Idan had stopped seeing her or she had stopped using that perfume or any perfume at all, because no scent trailed him any more. The telephone signals had also ceased, which could also only mean that Idan was no longer seeing Randa or they had changed strategy.

Many wives who suspect their husbands of having extra marital affairs usually pray for one thing, especially when they know they can't stop him and what is going on. They pray that they never see nor hear nor smell the affair. She had. She had seen her, had heard her and had smelled her at her workplace and in her bedroom. But in this society where polygyny is a norm, how is a wife to receive adequate sympathy and understanding for a pain she may be suffering as a result of a husband's unfaithfulness? The

pain itself, that she is feeling, is doomed and becomes her failure. She is expected not to feel that pain at all. She is supposed to feel lucky enough to be the one wearing his ring, which should enable her to bear his little pleasures. Aggie smiled to herself. A bitter smile. A woman needed God's intervention in times like these to remain sane.

Idan had come home one night trailed strongly by Randa's scent. The emotional trauma of it, as she had pretended to be asleep had manifested itself into such severe chest pains that she had found herself wishing for death. Then Idan, having had a good fill of sex and food and alcohol, had fallen comfortably asleep the moment he had hit the bed. The revulsion she had felt for him was so severe that she hadn't even noticed when the contents of her stomach began to climb. She had thrown up violently on herself. It had happened just like that. So she had got up slowly to go to the bathroom, had removed her nightdress, had cleaned the mess and had returned to the bedroom. Idan had still been fast asleep, naked, with his legs sprawled widely like he knew no bars. He was snoring soundly.

She yelled his name. It was a loaded yell, dripping with pain and repulsion. He jolted like a rocket. She clicked on the light.

"Look at me Idan!" she cried.

Idan was so shocked and overwhelmed and confused that he just stared at her.

"Take a cloth!" she ordered.

He was so dumbfounded he just continued to stare at her.

"I said take a cloth!"

He did, still staring at her like one did at a deranged person.

"And now cover up your stupid cheap philandering nakedness!" she hissed, spitting pure venom.

Idan blinked rapidly, made to say something, thought better

of it and obliging her dutifully, obeyed her order like a robot. It was Aggie's face. He had never seen that look there before. It scared him stiff.

The following morning at the office, he could think about nothing else but the story that once appeared in a newspaper of a woman who got a knife, grabbed hold of her philandering husband's penis and whacked it off at its base with one slash like she was cutting through a block of butter with a hot knife.

He never went to bed naked again.

The thoughts sent Aggie to sleep in the bus that was taking her to her father and two mothers. She began to dream. She dreamt of God's arms around her urging her to let the tears flow to free her hurting soul. She listened to God's advice.

"Sister...sister, are you all right?" a concerned voice in a brown headscarf asked, shaking her.

Aggie woke up. Everyone in the bus was staring at her bewilderedly.

"You were crying in your sleep," the voice told her.

Aggie smiled, deeply embarrassed. "It's my father," she said, "I am on my way to go and see him. He is very sick. I can't help thinking about him. That is why I am crying."

She stayed awake for the rest of the journey.

Chapter Twenty

FINGERS PEEKED OUT of the small salon office window and chuckled. The black VW Passat car was still parked at the street corner opposite the salon.

Maa Cherie was styling the hair of a middle-aged woman who had just had all the grays in her hair, dyed jet black.

“He is still parked there, Madam!” Fingers announced to her boss.

Maa Cherie sniped, “Good luck to him. Maybe today Randa will show up.”

It aroused the curiosity of the middle-aged woman. “Is there a car parked across the street waiting for one of your customers?” she inquired.

“The third time,” Maa Cherie sniffed, “So shameful. He has dropped her here and picked her up a couple of times. That’s how come we know whom he is waiting for. She also has a steady boyfriend who occasionally drops and picks her up. So wrong. We suspect that she wants to get rid of this one and is playing hide and seek with him. That is why he is timing her here. Shameful. She is young enough to be his daughter.”

“Sugar daddy!” Fingers chipped in, “Baffling. Her boyfriend is so good looking and loaded too oh! I heard that his father is very rich. I wonder why she went in for this sugar daddy. It’s not like he drives an S-class Mercedes Benz or something? He seems to me to be just a public servant. It would have made more sense to me if he was a businessman or something.”

“She must be very greedy then,” the middle-aged customer snapped. “She wants more money. It’s basically why the young women and girls do it, or...?”

Fingers shook her head slowly. “As for sugar daddies, if a girl decides to sell out on her dignity and go in for one, then she had better go in for a sugar daddy in the true sense of the term. This black Passat man appears to me to be just economically comfortable. He doesn’t qualify as the typical sugar daddy,” she observed.

“Then maybe money is not Randa’s motive here,” Maa Cherie remarked, “Some girls do it for the attention and affectionate pampering. Randa’s mother has been ill for a long while. Her father also died when she was quite young. She could be in emotional need for that kind of affection. Her boyfriend probably doesn’t give her enough of it. He seems to be a very busy man.”

“The boyfriend?” the customer asked.

“Yes,” Maa Cherie responded. “He has been with her longer than the sugar daddy, yet I can confidently say that the sugar daddy has dropped her here far many more times than the boyfriend. That is the attention I am talking about.”

“But the black Passat man is also flattered by Randa’s youthfulness, I am sure.” Fingers chipped in. “It overwhelms some of them. They fall in love.”

“Love?” the customer spat. “What has that got to do with love? The girls are tools of pleasure for the old men. Simple. They use them and pay for the use of them. It’s a fine tuned form of the world’s oldest profession.”

“Oh!” fingers exclaimed, “that is an exaggeration. She is a university student.”

“So what?” the customer sneered, “Do you think prostitution exists only in the dark alleys of Accra? Or on the streets of the red

lights areas and around the Nkrumah circle? Haven't you heard about some of those so-called ladies who have their photos and phone numbers in albums at some multiple star hotels?"

Another apprentice with a shrill voice, who had been listening, invited herself into the conversation. "Madam, some girls are compelled to do it out of genuine financial need. My sister and I lost our mother when we were very young. Our father married again, but our stepmother was hell. Yet our father was so much in love with her that it blinded him to what was going on. She used to starve us. At sixteen, my sister, who was older, became involved with her first sugar daddy. He broke her virginity. He was so excited about that and swore to care for the two of us till his death."

"Is he dead?" Maa Cherie asked.

Shrill voice laughed bitterly. "His understanding of death was different from the universal one. He apparently had an appetite only for girls below eighteen. He dropped my sister like a pest two years later and went in for a fifteen year old. My sister never recovered fully from that experience. She lost something vital which killed her passion. Sex became just a physical activity for her. No emotional attachment. She never had a boyfriend her age, only sugar daddies. Her last one was so wealthy and generous it was unbelievable. He showered her with cash like he did his beer belly. He was in the process of acquiring a passport for my sister to enable her accompany him on his trips when they arrested him in Amsterdam with drugs."

"Then your sister had better go and offer a big white fowl to the gods and some fine cedis notes to her pastor," Fingers quipped.

"He would eventually have used her as a courier," the customer added.

“We know,” shrill voice nodded sadly. “The thought is frightening.”

“There are more like him out there!” Maa Cherie stated, “Trapping young women into the drug trade.”

“And a whole lot of girls out there are willing and waiting to be trapped!” Fingers observed. “They are the kind that the men prefer. They pay well.”

“As for my sister, she has learnt her lesson,” shrill voice remarked. “But all that she has been through has taken its toll on her. She cries sometimes over how she lost her virginity. She says she didn’t feel a thing.”

“She shut herself off emotionally,” Maa Cherie commented.

“I think so,” shrill voice agreed, “Sometimes she cracks a bitter joke that all she recalls about that first time was the sugar daddy’s ‘corn and groundnut’ jagged and discoloured teeth.”

Fingers peeked through the window again.

“Is he still there?” Maa Cherie asked.

Fingers laughed and replied that he was.

“Maybe he has given Randa something and wants something in return,” Maa Cherie conjectured.

“Then he must be one of those who for even a medium-sized Golden Tree chocolate, would demand a reciprocal benefit in kind,” the customer remarked.

“Well, at least they do an honest job!” Maa Cherie opined.

“Oh Maa Cherie!” the customer laughed, “Did you just land on this part of the world or what? What honest job? How much is their monthly salary that they should be able to afford to maintain chicken soups and be sugar daddies? They also do their bit of drugs trade. They cook the books and take bribes.”

The salon erupted into laughter.

A woman in a Woodin print skirt waiting for her turn to have

her hair washed, remarked loudly, “These cheating husbands, why can’t they just be faithful and stick to their wives?”

“Sometimes they are not entirely to blame oh!” Fingers chipped in. “Some of the young women employ spiritual means to charm them. They say there is an occultist around Circle who is very powerful. His magic charms are sharp. They say the volumes in which the young girls flock there, you cannot even begin to imagine. They go to seek all forms of magic potions to lure and enslave wealthy old men. Wives are agonizing. They say he sometimes make the clients sit on buckets and wash their...”

“No!” a deafening yell from across the street cut short Fingers’ hot gossip.

They all rushed to the window to look out. The man in the black Passat was out of the car and pleading fervently with Randa, who was flinging her arms in the air and yelling at him.

“For the umpteenth time,” Randa yelled on, “Get it inside your head Idan. Let it finally get in there and stay there. I am not pregnant with your child. You did not make me pregnant. I am not carrying your baby or any other man’s baby for that matter. I am not interested in meeting your mother and your sister. I don’t want to get to know them. Tell them that. And let me repeat this to you for the very last time. I am not your girlfriend. I was never your girlfriend. It was a little necessary game I played with you. The game is over. Finished. So leave me alone!”

Idan remained rooted to the spot, shaken to the core of his spine. A game? A little necessary game? Over? After going to give Sisi and Efe so much hope?

“Randa...please!”

“Don’t Randa me!” she swung around with a growl, “And don’t you ever call my name again.”

The taxi driver who had come to drop Randa called, “Madam!”

He was completely shocked. He had been hired by her to bring her to Maa Cherie’s salon, but she had got down across the street, apparently on spotting the black VW Passat car, to confront the driver. She seemed angrier because of her suspicion that the driver of the car had been stalking her. She virtually flew out the instant he stopped the taxi.

“You didn’t pay me, Madam!” he told Randa.

Randa quickly apologized and went over and paid him. She tipped him with the balance, apologized again and headed back to Idan, whose whole body was by now literally shaking uncontrollably.

The driver cast them a final frown and got back into his car, shaking his head in amazement. “Foolish man!” he muttered to himself, “You have left your wife at home and come to chase this small girl. Now look at how she is using your face to wipe the floor like a piece of rag.”

He drove off, still insulting Idan who stood facing Randa like a drenched mouse.

For a fleeting moment, Randa felt a pang of guilt. Idan was innocent, she thought. He just got caught up in the game by virtue of who he was. Or was he? Aggie was known to have catered for him when they were students on campus. So no! Idan was not entirely innocent. He had participated somehow, even if unknowingly. He should have asked questions. He was not innocent.

“Randa please...for the last time...”

“Go!” Randa groaned. It was low and cold and deep. It felt like a threat with a loaded gun.

Tears welled up in Idan’s eyes.

“Just go Idan!” Randa said finally.

She turned like one exhausted and drained of all energy and started towards Maa Cherie's salon.

"She is coming!" Fingers announced softly.

Randa neared the salon with a grave, grim look. Dam had not been in touch for days, which was very unlike him. He used to call her almost every day. And as if that was not disturbing enough, Idan also comes jumping on her back about a non-existent baby he thought she was carrying for him. How infuriating. It was just something that she had once said in passing. And she hadn't even been emphatic. It was just something to pep up a moment. "Idan, who knows, I could be carrying your baby, you know." Just that, and he takes it so seriously that he goes informing his mother and sister about it?

And now Dam. Where the hell was he? She had been understanding and tolerant of his demand that she wait till he was independent of his father to meet any member of his family. She appreciated it. It was nothing new. Business people were happy when their sons and daughters married each other. It kept their finances intact and within their own circles. So Dam's demand made sense. If he didn't want this daughter of his father's associate whom his father was hoping he would fall in love with and marry, then he could only bring her into the picture after he was no longer with the father's business. But now that tolerance had also left her stranded. The only place she knew to go looking for him was this small flat he maintained at Tema. That was where they always met. She had been there since Dam's unusual long silence. Dam seemed to have disappeared into thin air. No one knew where he had gone. His mobile phone was also switched off. Where was Dam? He left no note. Nothing.

The exuberant voice of Fingers cut into her thoughts. Fingers

was on about the death of an African President who ruled as a dictator for so long that he became synonymous with his country. "Oh, as for this time they say that he is truly dead!" she said very loudly.

That President was said to have been protected by such strong and potent juju when he was alive that, allegedly, some mercenaries from another continent once contracted by a political adversary to go and eliminate him, turned into huge black frogs at the sight of him. Stories that abounded about his juju protection were so fierce that even with the current rumors about his death, people were still not willing to risk believing it yet. What if they did, began thinking and talking about him in the past tense, only for him to spring back from the dead like he once did? The fear was so pervasive that it was reported of the leader of the main underground opposition party to have advised its members not to rejoice just yet. "Brothers," the leader was said to have proclaimed, "Let us wait till the man is actually placed inside his coffin, nailed up, put inside his grave and covered up well and tight. Only then can we safely say he is truly dead. And begin to rejoice."

Laughter rocked the salon.

Randa sought a place to sit beside the Woodin skirt woman.

A woman whose hair was being washed at the sink said, "The last time we heard rumors about his death, didn't they say he had truly died?" she barged in.

"That is why the opposition are cautious!" Fingers told her.

"I can understand them. That other time, while others were on about his death at one radio station, I saw him with my own two eyes on a television station looking fit and strong without a single gray hair on his seventy something year old head!" the woman at the sink contributed.

"Exactly!" Fingers boomed. "If you ask me, that was the reason

why he appeared on television. He knew that news of his death had leaked. He had to appear in public to quell the rumor.”

“Oh, so the poor man hadn’t died and people wishing desperately for his death hung it around his neck by force?” the sink woman asked.

Fingers retorted, “Bless you and me, my dear sister, but poor is not a word I will ever associate with the man under any circumstance. Do you have any idea about his contribution to the stolen monies from Africa in foreign banks? He did die that time anyway. They say he actually died.”

“And?”

“When he...”

Ping! A dryer’s timer clanked to a loud stop. Fingers went to the customer and checked her hair. She decided the woman needed more time under the dryer and guided her head back under it. She returned to her seat with a tray of rollers and began to sort them out in colors and sizes.

“As you were saying before you were interrupted by the dryer, Fingers...” Ma Cherie prompted her senior apprentice.

There were customers who would swear that their choice of Maa Cherie’s salon had nothing to do with Maa Cherie’s undoubted expertise and everything to do with Fingers hot and original *tolis*.

“Oh yes, where was I?” Fingers resumed, “According to the rumors, that time, as soon as he died at the hospital in France...”

“It happened in France?” Woodin skirt asked.

“Yes,” Fingers confirmed, “He got sick in his country and was flown out to a hospital in France. As soon as he died, they say his ghost flew back incognito to his country and...”

“Incognito?” Maa Cherie interjected, “If it was a ghost, then it couldn’t be seen anyway. It didn’t need to fly incognito. It was

already incognito.”

The salon erupted into laughter, Fingers included, though she recovered in time and went on saying, “Oh, it’s true Maa Cherie. They say that time, he came with the intention of going to report himself to the ancestors, but as soon as he reached the entrance of the ancestral world...”

“You mean the ghost?” Woodin skirt asked.

“Yes,” Fingers replied, “The body by then was still lying on a hospital bed in France, and yet to be certified as officially dead. And in fact, they say that it was a very wise decision he took in rushing back home to check his fate with the ancestors.”

“Really?” Maa Cherie feigned seriousness.

“Oh yes!” Fingers played along.

“And who kept record of all this?” Woodin skirt asked, “Another ghost? Maybe a ghost spy?”

Renewed laughter.

“Well who knows?” Maa Cherie came in, “Take the Americans and their CIA for instance. What aren’t they capable of doing? For all you know, they have probably even bought and become owners of some of our ancestors whom they have planted as spies in our ancestral world. Maybe that is why our ancestors sometimes ignore us when we call them. Those planted there by the CIA intercept our cries and calls to them. So it doesn’t even reach the ears of our good and loyal ancestors.”

“You mean something similar to how Satan sometimes tries to intercept our prayers to God? They say he too has gone hi-tech and now uses evil computer chips.” Woodin skirt quipped.

“Something like that!” Maa Cherie prattled on.

The salon shook with more laughter.

Fingers resumed, saying, “Apparently, they say that, that President had friends there in the ancestral world still as loyal to him

as they were on earth. Fortunately for that President, it was one such loyal ancestor who was on duty at the gate..."

"The ancestral world gate?" Woodin skirt eyes widened to twice its normal size.

"Yes," Fingers went on serious faced, "So this loyal ancestor began waving frantically at that President and shouted at him..."

"Shouting? Ghosts shout?" the customer at the sink burst in.

"Whatever!" Fingers went on, "They must have their own manner of shouting. A nasal shout, maybe. But according to the rumors, this loyal ancestor shouted at that President to better hurry up and do a fast round about turn back to his body in France while there was still time, before the official certification of his death. The reason was that the spirits of some persons, now ancestors, who were dispatched by that President from earth rather prematurely and illegally through torture and extra judicial killings, had meant to show him where power lay in the ancestral world."

"You mean something similar to how new students in secondary schools are called greenhorns and bullied by the old and senior students?" Maa Cherie asked with a giggle.

"Yes," Fingers agreed, "So, that President's ghost did a very fast roundabout turn back to France."

"On a ghostly Concord?" Maa Cherie's sides threatened to split.

"I should think so!" Fingers replied with pretentious seriousness, "In any case, he managed to get back to the hospital and back into his body in the nick of time. They say the hospital was on the verge of pronouncing him officially dead when woops! His eyes flicked open. They say you cannot even imagine how the nurses by his bedside fled for their dear lives. That's how dead they deemed the man to be. But that was then. This is now. And this time he is dead. Truly dead."

A deafening roar of laughter greeted Fingers' conclusion to her *toli*. Only Randa didn't laugh. Fingers knew Randa to almost never laugh, but in reaction to something funny, she normally extended the corners of her lips into a smile. This time, Randa seemed not to have heard a word of all that was babbled.

Another apprentice by the sink doing the hair wash of the customers, signaled for the next person. Both Randa and Woodin skirt rose. Woodin skirt sized Randa up rudely and said curtly, "I think I was here before you."

Randa, whose eyes were riverted to the salon entrance, muttered, "No, I am not here for the washing. The woman at the entrance is looking for me, She is my brother's wife."

She picked up her bag and headed out of the salon.

Elsie waited solemnly with folded arms. One look at her face and Randa knew it wasn't to be a pleasant encounter. Elsie had never called on her at the salon before. Indeed, Elsie rarely dealt directly with either her or Cora. Most of the time, Kweku dealt with them on his wife's behalf. Was it Ma? It had to be Ma. She had left Ma alone in the house. Cora had left earlier on her trip to the old man. But Ma had been asleep when she left to come to the salon. She had made sure Ma took all her pills before she left. And because Cora had also been away, they hadn't opened the shop at all. She muttered a fervent prayer that all should be all right with Ma.

"Can we find a place around here to sit?" Elsie asked as soon as Randa got to her.

Randa became nervous. "Is it about Ma? She is alone at home. I locked the front door. Did something happen to her?"

"Not that I know of," Elsie replied with a grim face, "It is not about Ma. I think that Ma is all right. Let's find a place to sit down."

They found a bench near the salon under a shady tree behind a refrigeration and air condition repair shop. As soon as they were seated, Elsie said, "I called the house. No one picked it up."

"I always lower the ring tone when Ma is alone there and asleep."

"So I called Kweku. I didn't tell him why I wanted to see you. I told him that it was urgent. He persisted in knowing. I told him he was wasting time because I wasn't going to tell him anything until I had seen you. I wanted to see you before someone outside the family did. He suggested I called your mobile number. I told him I needed to talk to you face to face and not on the phone. Then he remembered that you normally visited the salon at this time. I decided to risk it and come here straightaway and fast. If I hadn't met you here, I would have gone to the campus."

Randa frowned. "You are frightening me, Elsie."

Elsie sighed. "I'm sorry if I am." Then she looked Randa straight in the eye and asked, "Have you seen today's T&T?"

Randa roared with such laughter that Fingers would gladly have parted with money to see. "T&T? Elsie, I don't go buying T&T."

"I know," Elsie muttered. And she did. No print media in the country manifested the notion of good news being no news as the gossip paper T&T did. Not a single edition ever had a front-page headline void of notoriety. Everyone was always interested in what T&T had to offer on its front-page headline. Everyone was always curious about who it had featured and what about. But no one wanted to be seen to be associated with it. No one wanted to be seen to be interested in its contents, let alone part with cash to buy a copy. It was simply a social thing. Hypocrisy at its splendid best. Elsie always got her copy from one particular newspaper vendor on their street. But she never bought it directly. It was

always collected together with other respectable newspapers by her house-help. She was a loyal customer. She occasionally tipped the vendor, so even if, as it happened that day, a hot headline led to a rush for copies, resulting in a shortage, the vendor always reserved Elsie's copy for her house-help to pick up for her.

"Today's front page featured more on the late Pesewa," Elsie began.

Randa didn't react. She didn't see what that had to do with her.

"We all know now that he committed suicide because he couldn't live with his HIV positive status," Elsie pronounced.

She began to get on Randa's nerves. What did all of that have to do with her? Her only connection to that saga had been when she accompanied Dina to Harvest FM for Sylv Po's GMG show with the 5th Wife. Then she had suspected someone was following and trailing her, but after a while, that also stopped. Had any or all of this unleashed some fresh problems for her?

"T&T has featured how they think Pesewa became infected with the virus," Elsie went on.

"So?" Randa grunted.

"It was his second wife. She apparently needed more sex than her husband could offer her as one of five wives. She could afford it, so she paid for sex outside the marital home."

Randa didn't react. Her face went bland.

"One of the T&T gossip paper's snoopers caught her a couple of times on film with a young man. It wasn't published earlier because the facts were sparse. It wasn't a story yet. Now it is a story."

She unzipped her bag and brought out her copy of T&T. She showed the front page to Randa. The headline was in red against a white background. In the right corner was a picture of a young

man under the title: The Cause of Pesewa's Suicide! The story was about the young man suspected of infecting the second wife with the AIDS virus. He paraded as a businessman. He was rich, had hordes of girlfriends and was indeed a male prostitute. Since he got wind that his story was due to appear in the T&T to blow his cover, he had disappeared. His picture had been published to enable all who have had sex with him to go and test for the AIDS virus.

Randa sat there numbed. She couldn't speak. She wanted to say something. She tried to, but her jaw wouldn't budge. The numbness invaded her whole body. She attempted to raise one leg. It failed her. Then suddenly, like a light switch turned back on with a click, the energy flooded back in huge waves, overpowering its space. She yelled. Elsie held her. She yelled again. And yelled again. There was a horrendous weight in her chest. It felt like a tractor was testing its huge rear wheels on it. The pain was excruciating. It burst forth from her chest and descended to her left arm. She began to sway. Elsie noticed what was happening. She screamed and rested Randa on the bench. Then she sprang up towards Maa Cherie's salon, howling for help.

Chapter Twenty-one

AGGIE SETTLED DOWN nervously beside her mother on the seat in the out-patients lounge. Mena Kakraba shifted to make room for her and resumed what she was doing before, cracking her knuckles. Ntifor had been sent to the treatment room and Aggie observed the nurses in there with him casting her intermittent venomous looks: the kind of looks nurses cast irresponsible mothers who administer unprescribed drugs to their children at home and then rush them to the hospital only when it is critical or too late. Aggie guessed what the nurses were probably thinking. She was certain that the doctor thought the same too when they had gone into his consulting room earlier on. A male relative had virtually carried Ntifor in there as he had done from the taxi that brought them to the hospital from home. The sore was still tied up with the herbalist's strip of cloth from the last dressing. The doctor appeared to have instantly suspected what was amiss the moment he glanced at Ntifor's leg, because before he ordered his female nurse assistant to loosen the strip of cloth, he asked Aggie and Kakraba to leave the consulting room. The female nurse didn't even completely untie the strip of cloth before the doctor asked her to tie it back on and go and summon two male wardens for him. He issued a hasty instruction to them to carry Ntifor carefully to the Treatment Room.

Feeling wrongly and unfairly judged by the doctor and the nurses, Aggie had wanted to go in and explain to them all, how she found out about her father's affliction only through a mysteri-

ous prophet's alleged revelation from God. At least it would make them understand that she wasn't to blame for the long delay in bringing him to the hospital. But one of the nurses emerged from the Treatment Room just then and cast Aggie a quick sad look. Aggie wasn't sure if it was meant to convey the nurse's empathy or understanding or both. But it abated her urge to go and clear her name. The nurse disappeared into the Consulting Room. She emerged minutes later with a different demeanor, refusing to look in Aggie's direction and take in her anxious and expectant look. Kakraba cracked one knuckle loudly. Aggie wanted to scream at her mother to stop. She managed it with a low growl. The doctor hastened out of his Consulting Room shortly after, towards the Treatment Room with a very grim expression, his worst fears apparently confirmed after the full exposure of what lay covered beneath the strip of cloth. His nurse assistant who was following him, had to virtually run to keep up with his long strides. They stayed in the Treatment Room a while. Then the doctor finally came out and rested a bland empty look upon Aggie and her mother. Aggie wished Mena Penyin was with them to provide some emotional back up for whatever bad news awaited them. But Penyin had to stay behind to take charge of the home.

The female nurse beckoned to them to follow her and the doctor back to the Consulting Room. Several tense minutes elapsed as they all remained quiet while the doctor scribbled like mad on a yellow notepad. Mena Kakraba's chin was cupped in one hand while Aggie sought to maintain her sanity by examining and re-examining her fingernails. Then the doctor raised his head suddenly and posed two questions in such rapid succession, he obviously wasn't expecting answers. "How long has he had this? Why did you wait till now to bring him to the hospital?" And almost immediately, while his eyes burrowed into Aggie's and

scanned Kakraba's face, added bluntly, "The diseased spot is rotting away. The flesh is putrefied. We will have to amputate his leg."

Kakraba burst into tears.

"I arrived from Accra only yesterday," Aggie stuttered, unable to hold back longer, "I live and work there."

No one responded.

Kakraba cried, "I don't understand it. How did it get to this? When it started, he even thought it was just a mosquito bite. So he rubbed the spot with a little menthol ointment and forgot all about it. Then he noticed the small swelling and we all concluded it was a boil, till it developed into this small round lump under the skin and he revealed that it didn't pain him at all. My rival and I found that very odd. Which boil didn't hurt? So we told him that it couldn't be a boil. That it had to be something else. But he disregarded our views and continued to apply herbal pastes used to treat boils. We knew he hated hospitals. He trusted herbal treatment so we urged him to go and show it to the herbalist. Initially he was even just sending us to the herbalist for his regular supply of the roots and herbs for treating boils, which we always ground for him to apply himself. Even when the skin of the affected area ruptured, he sent me to the herbalist to collect herbs for treating sores. It was only when the sore started expanding rapidly that he personally visited the herbalist, who continued to treat it like an ordinary sore. And now you talk of cutting off his leg? Doctor, he would rather die than lose one leg."

The patience each of them exercised to listen to Kakraba's recounting of events dissipated the moment she was finished. Aggie burst in with the question, "Doctor, please, was it the herbs? Did some of it compound the disease?"

The doctor sat up and replaced his pen inside his coat pocket. Then he cleared his throat and asked simply, "Have you ever heard

of the skin disease called Buruli ulcer?”

Aggie was astounded. Buruli ulcer in their hometown? She knew it gained its name from peculiar ulcers that rampantly affected Rwandan refugees who were living in Mengo, a Buruli province of Uganda. And that it was the third most common mycobacterium disease after tuberculosis and leprosy. Buruli ulcer existed elsewhere, everywhere else but in their innocent hometown. How did it get to their hometown?

But Kakraba chipped in a little contribution that cast some light on the puzzle because the doctor seemed just as astounded as Aggie. The region was not a known endemic area. “He is the appointed caretaker of his family’s cocoa farms in other parts of the country. He visits the farms regularly.”

The doctor opened a drawer and rummaged through. He didn’t find what he was looking for and pulled out a second drawer. He located the blue plastic file he was seeking. It contained several sheets of printed material. He pulled out a couple of sheets clipped together and handed these to Aggie. It was information on the disease. Aggie browsed through the endemic countries of Africa, Asia the Western Pacific and South America. Her eyes roved back to the listed African countries. She was shocked. So many countries and yet so little talked about the disease.

“Check the third page,” the doctor advised. “You will find more there on Ghana.”

Aggie did. And figured out how her father could have come into contact with the bacteria. Two of his family’s cocoa farms lay in endemic areas. Aggie looked up at the doctor, “So what causes it?” she asked.

The doctor shrugged, “Information about it is rather scanty. But what has been established is that the disease often affects people who reside near rivers and stagnant waters.”

Aggie gave the information sheets back to the doctor. "It said it affected mostly women and children under fifteen years of age. Old men like my father are not usually affected. How come..."

"Could the teacher be...?"

"Please mother! Shut up!"

Ntifor was sent to the ward on admission while Aggie and her mother left for home to pack some things to bring to him. As they neared the house, they noticed what appeared to have been a crowd that had gathered in front of the house and which was now gradually dispersing. Then they overheard someone say, "That is his other wife and their daughter coming. *Shiee!* I swear, had she hit her with it, she would have died right here on the spot. Right here."

Aggie and her mother quickened their steps, almost breaking into a run. If who had hit who with what? What had happened while they were away at the hospital?

The answers presented themselves when Aggie, who was leading, spotted Mena Penyin at the foot of the steps. She was shocked into such a sudden and abrupt stop by what she saw that, Mena Kakraba ran right into her. Holding the largest fufu pestle from the kitchen like a spear, Mena Penyin did not look an iota less than a warrior. Her face was furrowed in anger and her breathing was hard and sharp.

While Aggie and Kakraba struggled to recover from their respective shocks and inquire about what happened, Mena Penyin panted furiously, "I would have crushed in her head if she hadn't bolted. That was what I would have wanted to do. Crush in her brains!"

"Who?" Kakraba shouted, "Penyin, who?"

"Did someone come to steal something from here?" Aggie also managed at last to also recover her voice.

Penyin snorted, "A thief? A thief would have deserved a pestle all right, but the small one would have sufficed. This woman is worse than a thief. She deserved the largest pestle in this house. One blow was all she would have needed to be on her way to her maker. Look at the dissention she almost caused in this household with her nonsense? I would have shown her what proper nonsense was if she hadn't bolted."

To Aggie's surprise, her mother burst into laughter. She laughed so hard that no one would have believed that just a short while ago she was shedding tears in a doctor's consulting room at the hospital. Then her laughter infected Penyin and she also saw her anger melting. She let go the pestle, which hit the ground with a thud, clapped her palms together and convulsed into laughter, swaying her torso to and fro.

Aggie had no idea what the whole drama was about, but watching her two mothers on the laughter bandwagon, she too joined in.

Kakraba recovered from the laughing fever and managed between giggles, "What we started telling you yesterday about that teacher and her talk of sacrament and sin and..."

"You were going to refer to it in the consulting room when I shut you up," Aggie reproached.

"Yes. For a moment I thought ...ah! But seeing Penyin here like this...Oh! I completely forgot that she was due back today to see your father about the sin."

They burst into renewed laughter.

"Let's go Penyin! Let's go!" Kakraba called, "Let's go and pack our husband's things!"

They walked off together, still laughing.

Aggie remained behind and watched the receding backs of her two mothers till they disappeared into the room. Then she

approached a group of three women with their heads huddled together in gossip and who had apparently witnessed the whole drama. She greeted them loudly, interrupting their engagement. The women all turned and faced her abruptly.

"I am sorry to interrupt you this way," Aggie began, "But I was wondering if any of you know or saw what happened to the woman, the teacher, after she was chased away."

One of the women in a tattered *Charlie wotee* circumvented Aggie's question and remarked instead, "I really admire your elder mother," which was how the town's tradition viewed Penyin, not as a stepmother, but as an elder. "Didn't they say it was Kakraba that the teacher was convincing Ntifer to send packing? So you would have expected Penyin to be pleased with the teacher, no? Rather she was the one to chase the teacher away with a fufu pestle."

"That is because Penyin appreciates the good that the presence of Kakraba in the marriage did to them all," a second woman with very bushy eyebrows added, "Let's face it. Like it or not, according to our customs and traditions, all the children that Kakraba bore with Ntifer, belong equally to Penyin too, no?"

Aggie nodded in agreement.

"See?" bushy eyebrows went on, "So had Kakraba not come into the marriage to make a father of Ntifer, who would ever have addressed Penyin as mother?"

Aggie didn't wait for the others to consider that school of thought and prolong the conversation. She cut in quickly and asked, "So did anyone see where she went? The teacher?"

The third woman who had remained mute all this while had a hugely deformed upper lip. Part of it had been bitten off and swallowed in a fight with a woman she had suspected of having an affair with her husband.

“Someone advised her to run to the guest house near the park and lie low for a while before going to the lorry station,” she revealed. “Maybe she did just that.”

Aggie went into the house and told her two mothers to go back to the hospital with her father’s things when they were finished packing. She was checking something out and would be back soon to take charge of the house, she added. And then she left for the guest house. She met first with the receptionist who refused to give her any information about the teacher. Aggie entreated the receptionist. She told her that her father was at that moment on admission at the hospital; that his very life depended on her meeting with the teacher.

Had the receptionist insisted on knowing why Aggie’s father’s life supposedly depended on her meeting with the teacher, Aggie wouldn’t have found anything convincing to say. Fortunately, the receptionist swallowed the plea, offered Aggie a seat and went and informed her boss, the owner and manager. The manager asked the receptionist to return to the front desk. Then he went and knocked on the door to the teacher’s room. When he informed her someone wanted to see her, the teacher became alarmed. But as soon as the manager clarified who the visitor was, the teacher consented to meet her. Her apparent eagerness to meet Aggie even surprised the manager. He returned to the reception and informed Aggie that the teacher was on her way. Then he instructed the receptionist to place two chairs on the veranda for them. Aggie took her seat and waited. The teacher took her time in coming, probably testing Aggie’s patience. Aggie endured it. She had no choice. She had to talk with the teacher and find out who she really was if she wasn’t who she came presenting herself to be. And what she really wanted. She had been tired when she arrived the previous day. She had had some briefing of all that had occurred,

which had Aggie even more convinced of the need to meet with the teacher. She didn't anticipate the length of time they spent at the hospital. How could any of them have anticipated Buruli ulcer? They had all assumed it to be a bad sore. Neither did any of them have the slightest idea what Mena Penyin had in mind with the large fufu pestle on the teacher's arrival. It appeared everything had happened at once.

"Are you the one looking for me?" a voice barged into Aggie's thoughts.

Aggie's head swung in the direction of the voice. She was in a blond Afro wig. It looked silly on her, but otherwise, for what she had been through, the teacher was completely composed.

"Yes! Yes please!" Aggie found herself stuttering and hated it. Why was she stuttering?

The teacher took the second seat opposite Aggie and in a clear authoritative voice declared, "No need for introductions. We know about each other, don't we?"

Aggie wasn't in complete agreement with that, but she relented. She began to sweat in the palms and hated that too. Why was this woman in a silly blond wig having such an effect on her? She pronounced her words slowly when she spoke again, in order to drown the stuttering. "Everyone around here calls you the teacher. Will you tell me so I can call you by your real name?"

The teacher fixed her a stare that sent a chill down Aggie's spine. Her eyes were dark and something else. Dead! It was what came to Aggie's mind, a pair of dark dead eyes. Suddenly she snapped, "Cora."

"Cora?"

"Yes. That is my name. Cora."

Aggie warmed up a little. Knowing the name of the face under the silly blond Afro wig had the effect of melting some of the

iciness of her presence. "We sent my father to the hospital. It was from there we came to meet the confusion at home. The affliction on his leg is nothing spiritual. It is a Buruli ulcer." Aggie managed without much stuttering.

Cora didn't utter a word. She sat there in stony silence as if Aggie hadn't even spoken.

Aggie began to wonder if she had spoken loud enough and if Cora had heard a word of all that she just said.

Suddenly Cora smiled. A smile that told Aggie that she had heard all that had been said. It should have put Aggie at ease. Instead the smile sent Aggie's heart racing. The chill returned to her spine. There was something about the smile. Aggie felt a weight on her heart. It wasn't only what her eyes were observing. Her whole body was saying it too. Before she could think, she had blurted, "Do you have a sister called Destine?"

Mentioning Destine instead of Randa was subconscious. Randa came under the guise of Destine to MUTE. Cora came as the teacher to her parents, but who was Cora? At first sight there was no obvious semblance. If there was the blond Afro wig very successfully concealed it. But the smile; that was the one thing no silly wig could hide. When Cora smiled, it was Destine smiling. Destine almost never laughed. But she smiled a lot. She seemed to have substituted laughter with smiles. Aggie knew Destine's smile. And the smiles of Cora and Destine were without a shred of doubt, cut from the same yarn.

Cora noticed that Aggie was examining her. She became a little edgy. She laughed suddenly. "Destine? What an unusual name. I would love to have had a sister with such a beautiful and unusual name. But to your question, no, I don't have a sister by that name."

Aggie didn't believe her. She simply didn't. But she didn't pur-

sue it. In her mind's eye there was a maze. A canvas; colors, brushes, an artist. Strokes, lines and outlines. It was initially like a child that had been given a drawing sheet and a packet of color pencils and told to draw something, anything. The child draws just that, anything, which turns out to be something and yet nothing. In the beginning was the brush in the artist's hand, which was dipped in color and applied onto the canvas. Then strokes, and more strokes; lines, and more lines; elevations, forms, contours, signs, circles and suddenly, something begins to appear; something that makes sense; something remotely sensible but yet to gain complete identity. Aggie became alert. Cora had just lied; Cora who was Teacher. Aggie cleared her throat. "Can I ask you one simple straight and direct question?" she asked Cora unexpectedly.

Cora smiled. The air swelled with mystery, secrets, darkness, and death. An enigmatic smile.

Aggie sensed and smelled it. Cora knew what was coming and Cora who was Teacher, wanted it to come. Aggie landed. "What do you want with me?" she asked Cora, "What do you want from my mother? Do you want something from my father?"

Aggie had also wanted to ask of herself what was wanted of her. She knew now she was the link. But what was Cora's purpose?

Cora replied lowly, "Yes." And smiled wryly.

Aggie almost missed it. The reply. Her thoughts were on the sound of the voice instead of the answer about wanting something from her mother and father. Then it hit her. The response. She had asked if Cora wanted something from her father and Cora had replied, "Yes." Strangely it didn't shock her. They were playing games with each other and maybe they both knew it. Aggie could only play along. If she wanted to know what the game was about, it was all she could do. Play along. "What?" she asked Cora.

The muscles in Aggie's neck tensed and tightened as her eyes

and nose noticed and smelt a blaze rush and take control of Cora's eyes. It was fire. A flame. A vengeful flame.

"His soul." Cora uttered slowly.

Aggie broke into a cold sweat. Her face contorted.

Cora smiled. Flashes of Destine. Two smiles in one. Aggie opened her lips. She was attempting to say something, but whatever it was, failed to find volume.

Cora observed her keenly, taking in her suffering. A snake about to strike. But suddenly it withered away; the blaze, the fire, the flame. And something changed. Something transformed. If it was a spirit that entered Cora momentarily, then the spirit it was that left her to effect the change. Because like one hyper worried to right a wrong, she had unconsciously done, Cora rushed out her words as if in a hare race. "I know it may sound preposterous, but I took a great liking to your father. And after meeting the prophet who drew attention to the affliction on his leg, I became even more convinced to guide him to do the right thing and get baptized into the church. That was what I meant. I wanted to help him save his own soul."

Aggie nearly laughed. "Don't you have anyone back where you came from, wanting and needing you more to have their souls saved?" she snorted.

The blaze returned so fast and unexpected into Cora's eyes that it almost knocked Aggie off balance. "I don't have anyone waiting for me in Accra." Cora spat out with pure venom, "My marriage...ah! Silly me! I talk of it as if it ever got to that. Let me put it correctly. What should have been my marriage broke up even before it began."

Aggie's heart lurched. What pain Cora must have gone through. Aggie could feel it. Her sarcasm and iciness towards Cora melted. Of course the fact that Cora's near marriage didn't work out for

whatever reason, gave her no right to come and try to disrupt the marital harmony of her three parents. Yet Aggie couldn't help but sympathize with Cora. "I am sorry about your marriage that didn't happen," she offered.

Cora flashed her a smile in response and all Aggie could think of was something amorphously eerie. "Fate," Cora muttered, looking Aggie in the eye, "It was fate."

Aggie's mind somersaulted. "Fate?" she groaned.

Cora ignored her but continued to stare her in the eye.

Aggie cringed. "Do you believe in Greek mythology?" she stuttered, "The Fates?"

"Oh yes!" Cora shot out.

The words should have frozen. They were that chilly.

"So you know about the myth of the Fates? The three goddesses? Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos?" Aggie asked nervously.

Cora chuckled loudly. "Who doesn't?" she snapped.

'Meaaaow...meaaaow...' an intruder announced its presence behind Cora. Cora's face lit up at the sight of the cat. She bent and stroked it fondly.

Aggie's eyes transfixed on the cat. It was a black cat. A thick furred black cat with dark green eyes.

'Meaaaow...' it announced its departure and strode off elegantly.

"The owner's cat," Cora volunteered, "It took an instant liking to me when I successfully got here from your mother's fufu pestle. They are both your mothers, no? You don't differentiate, I heard."

"No, I don't!" Aggie stated and smiled stiffly.

Suddenly Cora blurted, "What were we talking about before we were rudely interrupted by Blackie?"

"Who?"

“The cat. It is called Blackie. Obvious, isn’t it?”

Aggie laughed like she had a locked jaw. “We were discussing the Greek goddesses, I think!” she managed. “I was about to say that I didn’t know much about it till...ah! Forget it. It is not so important.”

“Why not?” Cora shot out.

“Because I would rather talk about my father!” Aggie replied.

Cora cocked her head to the right. She said nothing.

“The affliction on his leg was nothing spiritual!” Aggie declared again.

Cora still didn’t speak.

Aggie grew frustrated. “Can you tell me who you really are?” she wailed, “You are up to something. What is it?”

Cora watched Aggie intently, still uttering no word.

Aggie felt Cora’s eyes dance. Cora was enjoying her discomfiture. It was as if a spell had been cast. Then Cora’s body moved, breaking the spell. She wriggled her hands and announced abruptly, “I must go. I must leave right now for the station. I have important things to see to in Accra. I’m glad I met you.” She rose and without another word, turned and strode hastily back into the guest house. The abruptness and unexpectedness of Cora’s action left Aggie completely dumbfounded. Suddenly Blackie reappeared in the door. Aggie’s heart raced. Of all the pets, did the owner have to have a cat? And of all colors, a black one? A black cat? As always appeared in her nightmares?

Blackie stood there in silence, its dark green eyes transfixed on Aggie as if contracted to keep an eye on her. The chills returned to Aggie’s spine. If Cora had made her nervous, Blackie made her even more nervous. She grabbed her bag and got up. She looked around to see if she could spot the guest house owner and leave a

message for Cora. He was nowhere near. She had a weird feeling that if she turned and began walking away, Blackie would jump and hurl itself at her. Maybe scratch her. The role of the black cat was never too clear in her dreams. It never directly attacked her. But who knew why Blackie was standing there and not coming to her for her to run her hands through its fur? Who knows why Blackie didn't take a liking to her like it did to Cora? Was it all part of fate's design? She turned her head again to the door. Blackie was gone. She started slowly away from the veranda toward the gate, conscious and alert, just in case the weird feeling should manifest itself again. Her thoughts were muddled.

Who was Cora? A daughter fathered by Ntifer perhaps? One that even Ntifer himself didn't know about? Maybe Cora's mother kept it from him for a good reason. Maybe the mother was now on her deathbed and felt she owed it to her daughter to let her know who her father was. Did she maybe die before she could explain to Cora why Ntifer had not been a part of her life? And thus untold, left Cora feeling embittered and vengeful by the perceived Ntifer's long neglect of her? For which reason Cora had now barged into their lives to torment them? Make them all pay for the long neglect she suffered?

A story like one once told of a man who died, only to have two previously unknown women materialize at his funeral with two sets of children all fathered by him? His legal widow had struggled along with him throughout their marriage to enable them put up their four-bedroom house. Upon his death, she had comforted herself with the thought of herself and their three children having at least a place to lay their heads in peace. They had constructed the house such that each child would have a room. It was not to be. The widow was quoted the intestate law and told bluntly, that while the late husband's two concubines had no right to any part

of the house, her three children were going to have to share their three rooms with their previously unknown siblings. The widow protested fiercely on the grounds that the two women were intruders in her marriage, so why should the products of their wrong and immoral acts be rewarded? Why should their children with her husband benefit from the combined sweat of her and her late husband? Especially considering that the concubines benefitted from her late husband's generosity when he was alive. The case went to court. Opinions were divided. The products of the two women's wrong behavior happened to be regular, breathing, fully-fledged human beings. They were not some factory products. Yet, would rewarding them this way not encourage other mistresses and concubines of other married men to bear them children? That was years ago. The case was still pending in court. Could Cora be such a child? Could she have...?"

"Aggie!" with dark authority.

Aggie had almost reached the gate. She swung round. Her name had been called with a hint of a dangerous taunt. Cora had apparently returned and begun following her quietly while she headed toward the gate and her mind on the story of the unfaithful husband. Fear gripped her. She hadn't even sensed Cora behind her. Cora could have done something to her and gotten away with it. She stopped and waited for Cora to catch up. Cora did, walking up to as close as she could and said, "You will hear from me sooner than later. Don't worry. I know you love your father. I loved mine too. But he died. Did I tell you that?"

Aggie's spine froze. "No!"

Cora laid an eye on her that neither communicated nor betrayed anything. "We all do love our mothers dearly, Aggie," Cora went on in a pancake flat voice. Then without another word, turned and walked away.

Aggie remained rooted to the spot. No sound came when she attempted to call Cora. She wondered what she would have said anyway. She observed Cora bend down by the door and knew it must be Blackie who had been waiting for her there. What black cat was this that took to a stranger to the town who only found herself at the guest house because of a stir with a fufu pestle? She regained her strength of mobility only after Cora disappeared into the guest house. She walked through the gate in a trance.

“*Agoo...agoo...agoo fie ha*. Is anyone home? *Agoo!*” Papa Driver called out loud. Then he frowned. It was odd. Ntifor’s home was never quiet like that. There were always one or both wives in the kitchen or on the veranda. Just his first ‘*agoo*’ was always enough to solicit response. This was unusual. “*Agoo!*” he called again, louder.

A tired voice asked from inside, “Is someone out there?”

“Yes. It is I, Papa Driver. I called several times earlier.”

“I must have dozed off. I am sorry. I will be with you shortly.”

Aggie emerged soon after. Papa Driver noticed immediately that not only did her eyes look like she had been shedding a lot of tears but at least, part of her spirit appeared to have also gone from her. Something very wrong had happened. “Are your mothers not in?” he asked. “And your father, where is he? How is his leg?”

Aggie offered Papa Driver a seat and dragged a stool for herself. “Ah Papa Driver,” she sighed, “So much has happened. So much. Oh! Forgive me. I didn’t even offer you some water to drink.” And rose.

“It’s all right!” Papa Driver beckoned her to sit, “I just had some to drink. Please sit down. I would rather know what is happening. Where are they? Mena Penyin and Mena Kakraba?”

“They are at the hospital, Papa Driver. They are almost always at the hospital nowadays.”

Papa Driver became alarmed. “Why? Who is sick?”

“My father. The affliction on his leg. It was nothing spiritual. So much time wasted with the superstition and herbs. Now his leg may have to be amputated.”

“*Oho!*”

“It was a Buruli ulcer.”

“*Oho!*”

“Now look at the repercussion on the family? The businesses of my mothers are the first victims. They should have been preparing their tea bread and Fanti kenkey by now. Instead, they are taking care of their husband at the hospital. The young women, who used to come and buy the bread and kenkey in bulk to re-sell, are also suddenly without stock. They are gnashing their teeth. They have children to feed.”

“*Oho!*”

“And me? I may have to send a message to Dina that I am compelled to stay longer than I planned.”

“Talking of which, that is why I am here. The lady from your office. I think she is your big lady, eh?” Papa Driver asked.

“Dina?”

“Yes. Her. Oh, what a fine lady she is!”

Aggie burst into laughter in a way she hadn’t in days. “Papa Driver, I think you have fallen in love with my boss!” she teased.

“Me? A common driver? How can I dare fall in love with such an educated woman like her? But she came looking for me at the station. And believe me, that I alone raised my status among my co-drivers. She said to bring you this.” He stretched forward with a letter to Aggie.

Before her departure to her parents, Dina had promised to keep Aggie abreast with any urgent matter that might crop up. So Aggie's mind wandered right away to the Esi Attah case. A breakthrough perhaps? An answer to the identity of the woman with the white car who had 'booked' Esi Attah's unborn child? Or maybe it had to do with Pesewa's fifth wife. The last she had heard, the fifth wife had come out of hiding and moved in with her four HIV positive rivals, to the amazement of the Pesewa family, most of whom were scared to death of even placing a foot on the steps of the quarters where the women had been confined.

Aggie examined the envelope. Whatever it was that it contained, obviously had nothing to do with any of the MUTE cases, she concluded. The handwriting was neither Dina's nor Vickie's. It was a regular letter, not suspicious like the one with the NEMESIS message. It was fully addressed with an internal postage stamp. It bore her full name and the complete postal address of MUTE. It was posted in Accra.

Papa Driver notified her that for the number of buses at the station which had to leave to go back to Accra before him, he envisaged he would be around for the next two to three hours.

Aggie thanked him for bringing the letter and promised to come and see him at the station with any message she might have for Dina. She saw Papa Driver off and returned to the room with the letter. She slumped on her bed and slit open the envelope with a nail file. She brought out the folded sheet of white paper and went cold even as she unfolded it and saw red traces. Why would anyone want to write to her with the envelope addressed in blue and the letter written with a red pen? Then she spread out the white sheet and turned instantly pale. Her hands began to shake.

The two words of salutation at the top left corner of the white

sheet danced in her eyes like a voodoo woman possessed. Was this what all that had happened was about?

The voodoo beat to which the possessed woman was dancing, began to sound in her ears. She stared transfixed at the pure white sheet. White like the wide skirt of the possessed woman, which was whirling around her hips as her body, taken over by the spirits, writhed and swayed and curled. She paused briefly, and then she contorted in frenzy. The two words in red. Red like blood. Curses! Death! A cock to be sacrificed unto the gods reared its head and uttered its final shrill and prolonged crow, announcing how soon it was to its end. Two words. Red. The woman possessed stretched out one hand and snatched the cock. The cock submitted its head into the hands of the woman possessed. The woman's pure white skirt whirled and twirled around her body. She held the cock by the feet and wrenched off its head from the rest of its body. Blood spurted onto her white skirt. Two red blotches formed. It was raw and savage. The blotches began to imitate the possessed woman, doing a voodoo dance of their own. The blotches of blood writhed and swayed and curled, and then contorted and snaked their way onto the top left corner of the sheet. Then whirling and twirling like the woman possessed, the dancing blotches of blood formed the words that was to take Aggie a whole almost twenty years back, when like Randa now was, she too was a student at the university. Two words arousing a cascade of unenviable memories and bearing with them the weight of waking up the dead from their slumber.

Two words: "Dear Flower..."

Chapter Twenty-two

ABOUT A YEAR shy of two decades ago, a middle-aged man, a senior officer at his workplace, sane in mind and sound in thought, sat behind his table in his cool air-conditioned office one mid-morning and cried like a child. His tears fell on the twenty-two carat gold wristwatch he had in his palms.

That morning, as of many mornings for a while now, he had read and re-read several times over, the book lying on his lap which was always opened to the page on suicide. He was someone's husband. He used to be a good and loyal husband. He was also the father of two daughters and a son. He used to be a very responsible father.

The tears he was shedding were for a loss. A loss of himself to himself.

The voice of his old mother, long dead and gone, boomed inside his head as he cried, admonishing him for what he had done and over which he was now shedding so many tears.

In his whole life he had possessed only one gold wristwatch, the very one in his palms and over which he was shedding the tears. It was made of genuine twenty-two carat gold.

He used not to pray much, but of late he had learnt to. It had become his only solace. And God knows how fervently he prayed over the gold wristwatch. It was a prayer of plea. "Please God, stop me! Help me! Stop me!"

God probably had a busy night of pleas. His probably got

mixed up in the pile of the 'not pressing' ones. That must be how come that morning, as he got ready to leave for the office, he went ahead and slipped the gold watch into his briefcase. God did not stop him. Now he was going to go ahead and do what he was drawn to do. The urge was irrational yet irresistible. He had lost control.

His hand moved mechanically to the telephone. It felt like the hand of a robot. He dialed the number. It was a number he had come to know too well. He needed and hated it at the same time. And each time he dialed it, he would tell himself it was for the last time. Now he knew better. There would never be a last time. God must have known, God who knew everything. That must be why his fervent prayer was classified as a low budget one not worthy of immediate attention. The last time would be when he himself had become the last time.

He dialed the number. The voice at the other end quivered with excitement when he was told what was on offer for sale this time. "A twenty-two carat gold wristwatch?" disbelief clouded the buyer's voice. He didn't doubt the seller. He was a good client. Whatever it was he had offered for sale had been exactly what he had said it was. The two valuable kente cloths; the cuff links, two silver and one gold pair; plus other items he had apparently sneaked out of the house without his wife's knowledge. Like the beautiful silver ice bucket. The buyer had been in the business for a long while. And the cardinal rule was never to ask a seller why he was trading away something obviously and undoubtedly so valuable. What if he told you truthfully that it was to pay a hit man to silence his nagging wife? Would you go ahead and buy the item or go to the police and report. Asking was not good for business, so he never asked. He repeated to the seller, "Do you really mean a twenty-two carat gold wristwatch?"

The senior officer stuttered, "Yes."

The buyer sensed that the seller had been crying. But that too was not his business. "Are you sure it is not one of those plated stuff?" the buyer asked.

It was always better to double check things and be double sure. Even with relatively truthful clients like the senior officer.

"It is genuine!" the seller repeated slowly.

"Then of course I am interested a thousand times!" the buyer sang melodiously, "Did I say a thousand times? No! Ten thousand times. That's how much interested I am. Same place?"

"Yes," the senior officer tried to suppress the tremor in his voice. He failed.

The buyer felt obliged to show a little concern. Just a little. Not so much as could spoil business. "Big Man, are you all right?" he inquired, "Are some creditors on you? Do you need for us to meet right away?"

Even a show of concern had to be such that it would be beneficial to the buyer and good for the business. With all the tears in the senior officer's voice, who knows? He could change his mind about the twenty-two carat gold wristwatch and decide against selling. The sooner they met to transact and conclude the deal, the better. It wasn't always that someone came trading in a twenty-two carat gold wristwatch.

A bit of flattery was also always good for business. Like the address: 'Big Man'. After all, the seller was a top officer at his workplace who had come down so low to selling his personal items. That was demeaning to his spirits. A salutation acknowledging his stance in society even sometimes made the seller open up more than he had intended. Information that sometimes strengthened the buyer's bargaining position. When the seller was under ravaging fire and feeling the intense heat of it, it placed the buyer at a very

good advantage, because then the buyer knew how desperately the seller needed the cash.

“No one is on me!” the senior officer replied eventually, sounding too normal, “I am all right,” he added tonelessly.

The buyer pushed the seller’s buttons further. From all indications, the senior officer was in dire need of money, which was good. It would hamper his bargaining urge. “Big Man, I don’t want any trouble, please. My business is trouble enough. The item you are offering for sale, is it really yours?”

The senior officer broke into fresh tears. He couldn’t hold back. If a prospective buyer asked to know if an item being offered for sale really belonged to the seller, it was tantamount to the buyer saying to the seller, ‘I don’t trust you. You could have stolen this item to come and sell it to me.’ Having to offer personal items for sale to raise cash was humiliating enough. To be doubted of one’s ownership of the item was for the senior officer, unbearably degrading. “Have I ever done something to you to deserve this insult?” the senior officer asked the buyer.

The buyer apologized right away. He had successfully accomplished his mission of denting the seller’s bargaining urge. “Shall we go back to where we were before my unfortunate and silly remark?” he told the senior officer.

The senior officer stuttered in reply, “Just have your money ready.”

His hands were shaking badly as he replaced the receiver. Then he caught his face in both hands and cried out loud. Tears of shame, not only for the degradation he had had to endure and the pain of parting with personal items he loved and valued, but also for the compulsion of having to do what he was doing. And for whom he had to do it. She was not his wife. She was young enough to be his daughter. She had become his obsession and he

had allowed her merciless claws to dig deep into every part of him. When she demanded, he fulfilled. She was his addiction.

Initially she was very loving, but then he had also been very giving without qualms and limitations, not once complaining about the excessiveness of her demands. His salary sufficed then. But she always wanted something new and more expensive. He was a husband and a father. He had fees and bills to pay. He had a social standing to protect. He tried to let her understand this. She didn't. They were on two different parallel lines. She issued him an ultimatum to either meet her demand or forget about her forever. He tried the second option. It lasted only three days. Three miserable days they turned out to be, which left him choking for breath with his need for her. It wasn't just the sex. It was everything rational and irrational; visible and invisible. It was her very presence in his life. She fulfilled him. She made him high. She was his alcohol and drugs and sex combined. He had to have her back, so he went borrowing to meet her demand. And it continued that way. Soon, he owed the bank and owed the company he worked for. And still she demanded. And because he could neither borrow from the bank or his company again, he resorted to selling his personal items. Now, even that was proving to be inadequate.

She demanded a ladies wristwatch, a gold one.

His gold wristwatch was his last valuable personal property left. After it, he had nothing more to sell for cash. Nothing.

She wanted a gold wristwatch. He was going to trade in his gold wristwatch in order to get hers for her.

Chapter Twenty-three

SHE HAD LOOKS that pleased the senses, she who came to take charge and control of his emotions; she who came to own and possess him and who came to be his fetish and obsession.

She grew up under the influence of society's salient acceptance of the culture of the objectification of the female body. While some complained and fought against that culture, she employed it to her advantage. The influence created a certain mentality in her mind, that her good looks were a means of survival and a form of security. With the added advantage of her youth, she became an effective system of cash and finance in her own right. She operated by her own rules and regulations, most of it learnt the hard way and adopted and adapted to best suit her needs.

One of the hard rules she learnt and adopted was, that in a relationship with a man who was already committed to another woman in the institution of marriage, sex had to be completely void of emotional bonds and intimate interconnections. Sex in such involvements was basically lust. She was just a target of his sexual fantasies and desires, an object he required to satisfy his need to fill up his sexual vacuum. So while other girls like her and in such relations expended their energies to impress the men so they would either add them to their wives or get rid of their wives altogether to create space for them, she concentrated on mastering the emotional art of being desired without necessarily feeling desire.

Along the way she made a crucial discovery. To be desired felt

very powerful. To be desired by a married man meant that the man had found his wife guilty in her inability to nourish his sexual hunger. It meant that the man no longer desired his wife to fulfill that task. It meant that his emotions were now in disharmony with that of his wife and that the man now preferred to depend on her to nourish his sexual demands. And that was overwhelmingly pleasing and deliciously powerful. By the time she enrolled as a student in the university and moved to reside on campus, a generous couple of married men had become dependent on her for this nourishment, their respective wives having woefully failed to do so adequately.

She became a connoisseur in sexual recipes and would sprinkle potent and effective dosages of her other qualities with it for optimum effect. She created the ultimate equation of sexual power and control over the men who, needing nurturing, the fulfillment of their fantasies and a release of their built-up tensions, became entangled in her web. Once they did, and she sank her claws into them, she made maximum use of them for worshipping and falling prey to her sexuality. Whenever she didn't necessarily want a man, but succeeded in her need to have the man desire her, the exhilarating feeling it gave her was more than the climax of the act of lust itself.

The day she and the senior officer had met almost two decades ago, she was on her way to her hairdresser. It had been threatening to rain earlier but the clouds had cleared. So the outbreak of drizzle had been unexpected. She was about to break into a run when a car horn tooted behind her. She stopped and turned. He beckoned to her from his car. She hesitated. There were days that she deliberately set out to look for such opportunities. That day had not been one. But the opportunity had presented itself. And she believed in fate. She walked up to the car, leisurely, even

though just seconds ago she had nearly broken into a run. He opened the front passenger door to her when she reached it. She sized up the car and sized him up. She didn't sit in immediately. She remained in the drizzle. His face clouded in confusion. Then she smiled gaily and he relaxed. She got in beside him, still smiling. He started the car.

"Am I the first young woman you have ever offered a lift?" she purred.

He laughed so loud that the answer presented itself.

The road to offering young women lifts in his car developed gradually over a long gestation period, beginning just after the birth of Randa. The urge simply manifested itself and he deemed it a phase he was going through due to the unexpectedness of Randa's conception and birth. Ma hadn't even known she was pregnant. She went to the hospital with the ambiguous complaint of feeling funny and unwell. When the doctor directed her to submit a urine sample for a pregnancy test, she laughed out loud. How could the doctor even think that as a remote possibility, she thought. From when Cora turned two, she and Pa had tried to conceive their third child. To no avail. Eventually, they got used to the idea and contented themselves with their two children, Kweku and Cora. So how could she be directed to have a pregnancy test with Kweku now sixteen and Cora thirteen? But the test result showed positive when it came. It was a pleasant forty-third birthday present for Pa. But with Randa's arrival came a shift in Ma's focus and attention. The best way Pa understood it was how he described his confusion to a friend.

"My wife has fallen completely out of love with me and fallen in love all over again with little Randa!" he said.

Ma lived for Randa and the shop. She lost energy for everyone

else. Kweku and Cora were teenagers with new interests and occupations of their own. They didn't miss Ma. Pa did.

"When she gets into bed with me, all she wants to do is to go to sleep," he complained to the friend. "And on the rare occasion that she gives in to me, she leaves me feeling like the whole activity was just another household chore. It is becoming too frustrating and difficult to bear."

Pa's frustration gradually developed into a tension that was waiting to erupt. Everyone lusts in the heart one time or the other. Some suppress and keep it in check. Others risk and live it out. Pa began to ruminate about it. Initially, just occasionally. Then gradually it gathered momentum. Eventually it became a pre-occupation. The absence of nurturing and intimacy began to eat him up. He began to fantasize about sex with another woman and felt guilty about it. And with the guilt came anger at the guilt. It became a lonely battle with himself. He could express his frustration to his friend but he couldn't open up about the turmoil with his fantasies. So he kept it in, which fanned the volcanic fires all the more. Soon, the inevitable happened. He discovered the practice of cruising in his car around areas where young women were known to seek rides in cars to offer services of pleasure to the male drivers for a fee. It abated the tension and frustration but it didn't offer what he was searching for, the nurturing and intimacy.

Then Ma also confronted him about the odd behavior he had suddenly acquired.

"For all the years that we have been married, you have been having your dinner before your bath. Why have you suddenly chosen to sometimes rush to the bathroom immediately on arrival home, in particular when you arrive home later than usual, before sitting down to have dinner?"

The question took Pa by surprise. He had no idea that Ma would notice or think it worth pondering over and ask about that. His friend once said of his wife, "The things you expect will upset them, don't. What we consider to be too trivial and insignificant is what they hit the roof over. Oh! Women!"

With Ma having posed the question and waiting for a reply, Pa felt compelled to offer her one, even if a lame one.

"It's just a feeling," he said. "Sometimes I feel the need to wash before touching my food."

Ma didn't pursue it, even though Pa could clearly see that she wasn't convinced in the least. The truth was that whenever he picked one of the strange young women for an hour or two of pleasure in his car, he felt tainted and dirty. And when he reached home, the need to cleanse his body before touching food or anything significant was always too overwhelming to ignore. Yet he couldn't control his need for the services of the strange young women. When the tension built up and the craving consumed him, all space for rational reasoning eroded to give way to just one thing; the need to have his sexual longings fulfilled. Pa was certain that, had Ma ever found out about what he was going through, she would have perceived it as a perversion and recommended prayers for it. How could he make her understand the normalcy of it, that as a man functioning fully and denied nurturing and intimacy, he would crave for it and go looking for it elsewhere? Yet he was certain that Ma would have condemned those very cravings as obnoxious and appalling and unbefitting for a respectable married man like him.

"Why do women equate respectability with 'clean' thoughts about sex?" he once asked his friend.

"Because that is what their mothers taught them to think!" his friend replied. Ma would probably have died of shock about so

many things. But not the pleasure ride service providers. Oh, no! Nothing demanded of them shocked them. Indeed, sometimes it was they who rather shocked him with some of their recommended recipes. But for them it was all business, and it was the lack of any emotional commitment and intimacy that left him feeling unclean.

In between the cravings and another visit to the areas of the pleasure rides, the risk he was taking haunted him. What if there should one day be an unexpected police swoop? The possibility of an arrest? A damaging headline: Senior Officer of Company X caught with a pleasure ride service provider at ...! The implications! Loss of job! Destruction of his family! Eternal humiliation! There had to be a less risky alternative. The rides of pleasure, aside the risks, also almost always involved a different woman. Women about whom he knew virtually nothing. There could as well be a ghost in there among them and he wouldn't know, or a bad spirit inhabiting a stolen or rented body. Maybe even a mermaid whose fins turned into limbs when she was out of water? Those women could be anyone and anything. There had to be a better alternative.

Pa began to toy with the idea of one permanent pleasure provider. A young and attractive mistress with whom he could share and live out his sexual fantasies and cravings without shame, guilt or fear. Someone who would nurture him and with whom he could even interconnect emotionally, why not? It would be like killing two birds with one stone. In return, he would also bestow all the financial benefits that would otherwise have gone to those on the streets. Pa warmed up to the idea and began a lookout crusade. Oblivious to whom she would turn out to be, where he would encounter her, when it would happen and how, Pa bided his time.

On that drizzly day when after he had followed and keenly observed the young and attractive figure about to break into a run to avoid the threatening rain, Pa didn't know that his mission was about to be fulfilled.

When he answered her question with that loud laughter, she settled in more comfortably in the seat beside him. Her yellow flared skirt shifted up in the process. Way up. She didn't make any attempt to straighten it back down. She remained there beside him with her firm young thighs completely exposed. The edge of her skirt was as far up as her upper thighs stretched. Emotions engulfed Pa. It was as if a horde of ghosts had been sent to haunt and possess him. Was she another kind of pleasure service provider? Were they not found only in the corners of those known areas under the cover of darkness?

"I am Agnes," she introduced herself without prompting, "My friends call me Aggie. So if you intend to become my friend then permission granted. Call me Aggie." And laughed heartily.

She was attractive and sexy and carefree. He was hooked. Pa's mind registered a field of sunflowers. An unending expanse of yellowness, like her skirt. Pleasing. Like her. She was brightness. She was a sunflower and more. A rose. A beautiful yellow rose. She was every beautiful yellow flower on earth. She was all that and more. He smiled at her, feeling fulfilled.

"You saved me from the rain!" she rattled fast and fluently. "What's yours?"

He could tell straightaway that she was different from those he had been picking up in those dark areas. If she was one of them and operating in such broad daylight, then she certainly functioned on a different wavelength, Pa decided.

He muttered his name to her. There was a little tremor in his

voice. Her effect on him had been fast and instant.

“I am a student at the university,” she divulged blithely.

That surprised him. Relatively, he was a novice in the milieu and had, with the little he had come to know, associated only a certain caliber of women with these games.

She smiled at him. He felt embarrassed because he suspected that she had read his thoughts. She was smart. She was an intellectual. She was beautiful and she was sitting beside him inside his car with her beautiful yellow skirt way up to where her thighs began. What more could he ask for?

His fantasies and longings fused. He had trouble controlling its physical effects. She cast a long and deliberate look down his lap and roared into a loud unbridled laughter. He could only manage a deeply humiliating sheepish smile. He hadn’t uttered one suggestive word but he didn’t need to. Their understanding seemed destined and mutual. His instant longing for her clung to him like a second body odor. She turned her face away from him and sank deeper into her seat. Her yellow flared skirt further misbehaved. It drained him completely. He failed to find the energy for any more words.

As if sensing it, she too remained quiet for the rest of the drive, after she directed him to her hairdresser’s salon. Only there did she straighten down her yellow flared skirt. He kept his eyes away but it didn’t hide his inner struggles.

“Would you want me to come and pick you up after you are done with your hair?” he suggested.

She brushed a hand over her bosom and drawled a decline of the offer with thanks but no thanks.

He was literally deflated. Then just when he thought that all was lost, she added lightly, “But you can give me your office number and the directions.”

He obliged with lightning speed.

She promised to call him at his office the following day.

He brought out his wallet and pulled out a wad of notes for her. "For the taxi back to campus from here today and from campus to my office tomorrow!" he told her.

Aggie restrained herself from jumping for joy. Signs of a generous man were always a jackpot. She suspected she had hit one in Pa. She thanked him graciously and turned to go.

"No!" he blurted, stopping her in her step.

She turned to him astonished and confused. "You don't want me to come to you tomorrow?"

"No! Not that!" he said, "I will die if you don't come."

She laughed, still surprised. "But you said no."

"To being one of your many friends," he said. "I want to be your one special friend. So I won't call you as your many friends do."

"No?"

"No!" he smiled, "I will call you by one special name."

"What?" she asked.

In his mind's eye, Pa saw the expanse of sunflowers again. The yellow roses and all the beautiful yellow flowers. He smiled at her, fulfilled.

"Flower!" he sang.

"Flower?"

"Yes. That is what I will call you. That will be my special name for you. Flower."

Aggie's roommate, Minny, was pacing up and down when Aggie returned to campus from the hairdresser's.

"He has been here three times already!" she snapped at Aggie.

Aggie frowned. "Idan?"

"Who else?" Minny wailed, "He is becoming suspicious of me, Aggie. And I don't like it. He suspects I cover up for you."

"And don't you?" Aggie teased.

"Silly!" Minny rebuked.

Aggie waved her hand in dismissal and said, "Minny, let's talk about more pressing issues." Then suddenly mimicking a tango to an imaginary tune, purred, "I just hooked me another provider."

Minny laughed. "When? Where? How?"

Aggie recounted the whole incident.

When she was finished, Minny burbled, "Have you fixed him a role already?"

"The role was already there and waiting to be filled," Aggie bragged, "He will supplement my charter flight cost to London and my shopping, for now. Later he will take care of my wants."

"Wants or needs?" Minny squealed.

"Wants!"

"That makes three of them now Aggie."

"I know. Now I can apply the brakes. They should suffice."

They collapsed together on Minny's bed with shrill laughter.

"Did you rate him?" Minny chortled.

"Sure. First impression, very malleable. Almost green. But his hunger was too obvious. His whole being was crying. I am sure his old lady has kept him behind bars for a long time," Aggie remarked.

"Or maybe she is one of those who acts like the Pope's right hand women. Pious to the hilt!" Minny began, "Maybe even reciting verses while at it."

"And seeking forgiveness for doing it?"

"Who knows?"

More laughter.

“They drive them into our hands then blame and accuse us of having snatched their husbands!” Aggie remarked sourly, “I doubt if the wife even ever heard or ever dished it out to him...you know...” And slipped her right forefinger inside her mouth.

They doubled over with more laughter.

“I can smell the prospect of some serious schooling in the offing!” Minny burbled.

“You bet!” Aggie agreed, “And I am going to tutor him real good and slow with all the intricacies of the trade, so that by the time I am done with him, even at the primary level, he will be clinging to me like my second skin.”

The laughter cleared abruptly from Minny’s face. “Aggie, don’t push things too far,” she warned seriously, “You know how emotionally frail some of them are. They can get it all mixed up real fast. Then things can get complicated. If he is not one of those naughty well versed ones, the danger of fusing love and sex and lust is greater.”

Aggie waved her hand again and spluttered: “there is always a way out!”

“What about Idan?” Minny asked.

“Oh Minny, come on. Idan is the love of my life. Just dig up more fine excuses for him when he comes around, and I am out servicing one of my three providers.”

Minny said, “You talk as if I have no servicing of my own to do too.”

“Minny, please!” Aggie coaxed. “I now have three to service. You service only one. I would have preferred to hit it big with just one like you did. You got lucky, Minny. Twice.”

“Twice?”

“Can’t you see? Your serious love is way off in another region. So you are free. Gosh! Why did I have to fall for Idan who is here

on campus with me?” Aggie moaned, “Ah, honestly, he gets on my nerves sometimes.”

“Yet you love him!” Minny teased.

“Can I help it?” Aggie cried.

Minny muttered thoughtfully, “Do you think he suspects you? Us?”

“Idan?”

“Yes. I mean it’s not like our love guys aren’t aware, are they?” Minny reflected.

Aggie said, “If he does, he hasn’t confronted me.”

“Has he ever asked you about where all the expensive gifts you shower on him come from? Don’t tell me he thinks they come from your parents.”

Aggie guffawed. “From the tiny fraction of income from my father’s family cocoa farms? Or from the tea-bread and Fanti kenkey businesses of my mothers? Of course he knows it doesn’t come from there. Ironically my parents also think he is the one taking such good care of me. Isn’t that funny?”

Minny chuckled thoughtfully. “Maybe he is suspicious of you Aggie,” she suggested, “but would rather remain just like that, than know the truth. It is easier on his conscience to pretend ignorance. That way he won’t be compelled to reject the gifts you shower on him.”

That hit Aggie hard. She remarked lowly, “I should think so.”

Chapter Twenty-four

MA HAD DEVELOPED the sixth sense, that many women were known to have, about their spouses after a considerable period of marriage. So she sensed Pa's growing distance and his emotional rejection of her, fast. And it hurt like a thousand daggers through the heart.

Pa couldn't help it. His emotions were committed to Flower. Flower who filled him up with fresh pleasantness. Flower with her full glossy lips, always sultry and pouted and sensual when she touched and explored and did things to his body that he had never thought existed. Dark mysterious Flower who emitted flavors of both innocence and guilt. His attraction for her was violent and sweetly sinful. It was different, bad, naughty, strong. It stirred and scared him at the same time. Flower flared and lit up fires of longings long gone low and benign in him. She rekindled his passion and injected momentum into his lifestyle, which had fallen in the doldrums of routine. The same time, same way, same thing cycle had curdled inside his belly for too long and was churning and burning and seeking to burst out. The boring and killing sameness, all polite, all correct, all formal, even in sex. Day in and day out it killed him slowly without him noticing. A slow unconscious death. Marital suicide. Then Flower came into his life and saved him with her physical pleasantness and freshness and her dangerous sensuality. Flower was so out of routine it was dizzying. And so out of tune it felt crazily risky and magically good.

When he picked her up for their periodic stolen sessions, Flower was always all smiles and all ready. It was almost like a ritual. He would open the front passenger door and she would get in and slump on the seat beside him with her thighs carelessly parted as if unintended but very much intended. Then smile at him, knowing he was warming up for the yet to come. It always felt like fire through his veins. His heart would race, pumping at a mad rate and leave him intoxicated with his hunger and desire for her. It was pure madness, a dangerous adventure. And he loved it. The ritual.

“Flower,” he would call out of breath; out of control.

And Flower, pretending to be taken aback, would respond, “What?”

He wished she had a special name for him too like he did for her. Flower. He had a special name for her because she was so special to him. She didn’t have a special name for him. Was it because he wasn’t special to her? What was he to her?

Initially, Ma’s prayers were silent. She would go down on her knees in front of her bed and pray quietly to God and beg God to please ease the pain in her heart. Then she began to notice Pa’s occasional too strenuous efforts to do things right. To please her in the nice, normal, formal way he knew how. They had been married for over two decades. Kweku had turned twenty-one. Cora was eighteen and Randa was five. Children conceived from a lovemaking dutifully expended. Nothing fanciful. A straight nice, normal encounter. The marital bed, a holy ground. Dirty games and weird fantasies were not carried out on it. And not with the mother of their children. No! Those dirty games were played elsewhere. But descending from the giddy heights Flower always sent him to the normalcy and sameness of routine

with Ma on the holy ground that was their marital bed, became increasingly difficult for Pa.

Flower had kneaded and molded him to become her helpless puppy of lust. With Flower he always gladly and willingly packed his reputation and dignity and common sense into the garbage bin in order to succumb wholeheartedly to the rage of passion. It was Flower who held the button of control in their intense encounters. Switching from that to being in control, when with Ma, and behaving sexually correct, proved increasingly tedious and near impossible.

Ma had been married to him for too long not to notice. She sensed his agony at forcing passion where it had ceased to exist, his desperate attempts to right the wrong done her by clamoring to inject life into what was long dead at its roots. Ma's prayers slowly began to find voice. And when she prayed, it was no longer only for the easing of the pain in her heart, but also for the survival of her mental faculties, because she began to feel and sense it slowly and gradually slipping away. It was as if a volcanic heat was slowly building up inside her head. Pa's frantic pretentiousness and his clumsiness began leaving Ma feeling debased and degraded. She felt insulted and ashamed for herself and for him. He didn't want her. He no longer desired her. So why the act and pretense, since he knew she knew and she knew he knew she knew? The wall of Ma's self-esteem began to dismantle block by block. She took matters into her own hands. The next time Pa sought to dutifully perform his cold and passionless marital obligation, she coldly stated firmly, "No."

It didn't shock Pa. He was actually relieved. He didn't have to pretend any longer. Ma knew. He could now leave the flood gates of his desire for Flower wide opened forever. A passion as ferocious like hell's fire. Thank God Ma knew. There was no need to force

anything with her again. He could now succumb completely to Flower's absolute control.

Flower knew she had Pa in her palm and at her fingertips. She enjoyed the power she wielded over him. Pa's inner turmoil during her game with him inside his car always brought a smile to her lips. Her sultry lips that were always parted like her thighs. Pa worshipped her. She became his life's obsession; the focus of his very existence. His ruling passion. He loved it when she willingly and readily accompanied him to his world of fantasies and fulfilled them with him. Gradually, and without noticing it, the gap between Pa's dreams and his realities began to close. Flower was making it all happen. The throbbing desires; the fiery climaxes. Flower, just a year older than Kweku. Sometimes it made him feel horrible. But only sometimes. He was like an animal out of control. Just one year ago Flower would have been the same age as Kweku. Flower. She was Randa's age when he was already thirty-one. That analysis always left him feeling unclean. Like a thirty-one year old desiring a five year old. Hideous. Perverse. Sometimes it made him cry, hating all that he had come to love. All that he had lost control over. Yet the thought of life without Flower always left him frightened and nauseous. The thought of the possibility of ever losing Flower always filled him with a fear he had never experienced, not even with thoughts about death.

Ma's prayers turned loud and shrill, praying away her agony at finding out about the new object of desire in Pa's life. Ma began to pray so loud and in such a high pitched voice, she seemed determined to have her voice heard by God above all others.

Flower! The phantom. The third unseen figure in her marriage.

Ma's shrill prayers began to scare and confuse little Randa.

Cora took on the additional task of always comforting and assuring her that everything was fine with Ma. But both Cora and Kweku knew that nothing was fine with Ma. Something was not going right with Ma. Pa also noticed, but things were not going right with him either. In between having sex with Flower in the rented room of a hotel or motel, Pa lived for their next encounter. The waiting was always killing; debilitating. It manifested itself in ruthless aches in his whole body. Ceaseless throbbing pains. But he endured it all because he had no other choice. He had ceded control to Flower and had to bear it. So it was Flower, who controlled everything, including when they could be together, where, how fast or how slow sex had to be and where it should take place, whether in bed or in the bathroom or wherever. Flower was the boss. If he wanted her and she didn't want him, he didn't get her. It was as simple as that.

Initially, the intervals between their encounters were not long. But that was before he made the mistake and committed the crime of complaining to Flower about her excessive financial demands. Flowers set out to deliberately punish him. Eventually he had no choice but to give in to her suggestion of a compromise. When he wanted her and she didn't want him, she would take care of him on the telephone. That was also new to Pa. He had never done it before, like so many other things he did for the first time with Flower. But just the very first time, and Pa was hooked. Then Flower began to demand payment for that too, because the time spent on the telephone with him was time lost to studying. Pa resorted to a heavy alcohol intake to numb the aches in his body while waiting for Flower to dictate their next encounter. Ma was by now too busy screaming out her loud and shrill prayers to God to notice. She had by then, gone through all that a wife could take; and a wife could only endure so much. Ma witnessed

at first hand the slow enslavement of Pa, the man who was her husband and the father of her children, to Flower. Ma looked on helplessly as Pa disintegrated with his obsession with Flower who had become the core of his very existence. Ma in the beginning, used to watch it all from a high seat in an audience. Pa and Flower. Pa the puppet being pulled and controlled by Flower. When Ma became very engrossed in the puppet show, she would cry. Then in the morning, she would notice that she had cried while asleep. She never noticed it and never knew what time of the night she began to cry and what time she stopped. Then as her loud and shrill prayers failed to yield the required results she expected, Ma ceased watching the puppet show from the high seat among the audience and descended onto the stage to become a part of it. She fused with Pa on stage. Ma began to feel Pa's pains and aches and anxieties. But she failed to become obsessed with Flower as Pa was. She felt she had let Pa down in that and began the ritual of always murmuring apologies intermittently to Pa. She had let him down. She ought to pray harder. Ma's prayers from then on took on a hoarse and angry tone. Sometimes she became so muddled up she wondered to herself what exactly it was she was praying to God about, and what she wanted. Each new day became more confusing.

Observing from the real world, Kweku and Cora noticed Ma become increasingly disoriented.

"What do we do?" Cora asked Kweku in despair, "We have to do something."

Kweku sighed, exasperated. "I tried talking to Pa. You know, like man to man. But he seemed to me to be off somewhere too with his thoughts. He only listened attentively to me, smiled, turned without a word and walked away as if he didn't hear a word of all that I said."

“When?” Cora snapped.

“Yesterday. You were in the shop with Ma. But Elsie thinks...”

“Elsie?” Cora howled, horrified, “You went discussing such a sensitive and intimate family issue with this young woman you are courting?”

“She is conversant with this whole mental...”

“Kweku!!!” Cora shrieked, looking nervously about her as if there was someone else aside Randa around in the house who might have heard her brother, “Don’t start referring to mother’s situation as mental. Do you know what you are doing? Kweku, what if Elsie also goes to discuss it with other people? Do you know what people will begin to say about us? About this family? They will say that Ma is going mad. That is how easily people conclude such situations.”

Kweku held her sister close then let go of her and said, “Cora, the mother-in-law of Elsie’s oldest sister suffered a mental breakdown too some time ago. They sent her to a shrine, then a herbalist and finally to a prayer camp. The prophet of the camp, when he failed to cure her and found out that the old woman had previously been sent to a shrine and a herbalist, declared her incurable. According to him, the shrine had polluted her spirit beyond healing. Eventually she was sent to the Accra Psychiatric Hospital.”

Cora sighed and lamented sadly, “It is the whole asylum thing that makes me uncomfortable, Kweku.”

Kweku held her close again. “It is a reputable psychiatric hospital, Cora. The tag ‘asylum’ was because of the Lunatic Asylum Ordinance, which established a ‘lunatic asylum’ in an old High Court building, which was not in use before then, do you know that, in the early colonial times, mentally ill patients were treated as criminals and put in prisons? Can you imagine that?”

Cora shook her head.

“See? So it is our attitudes that have failed to catch up with changing times about mental health. And it is mostly due to our beliefs and superstitions. Do you know that in the early fifties or thereabouts, the Accra Psychiatric Hospital was the only psychiatric facility in West Africa?”

Cora laughed. “Did you go reading some history books in order to come and convince me about us sending Ma there?”

“Yes, sweet sister. And to show off a wee bit too!” he coaxed and teased Cora, “And also to tell you that the mother-in-law of Elsie’s sister is now cured. All it required was some counselling and medication.”

Cora remained unconvinced. “Did they send her like a patient would walk into Korle-Bu or what?” she asked.

“Exactly,” Kweku responded eagerly, “going to the psychiatric hospital doesn’t mean you are automatically going mad. That is a sad misconception. In other parts of the world, just like people have their personal physicians and dentists, so too do they have their psychiatrists and psychologists. It is just like going to the dentist to have your teeth treated. Look, just like our eyes and teeth are part of our human make-up, so too are our minds. If you have a problem with your teeth, do you go to see an optometrist?”

Cora laughed. “Of course not.”

“Exactly. And just as the mind is also a part of us, it can also have a defect like our eyes and teeth. If you have a problem with the eye, you go to an optometrist. For the tooth, you see a dentist. For a sickness of the mind, the specialist to see is the psychiatrist, whom you will find at the psychiatric hospital, just as you will find the dentist at the dental clinic. When we send Ma there, he will examine her and prescribe the appropriate treatment. That is all.”

Cora remarked sceptically, “How many people see it as you do,

Kweku? The stigmatization, if it should become an open secret that we have sent Ma to the psychiatric hospital to see a doctor of the mind – it might affect all of us, Kweku. Mental illness is believed to be caused by supernatural evil forces associated with a family and therefore hereditary. If Ma has been caught by it, then any of her children can too. That is the notion, which we cannot wish away with a fine analysis like yours. It is the prevailing perception. You are lucky to be courting a young woman like Elsie who understands. But what about Randa and me? What if it affects any of us in future?”

“It won’t!” Kweku hugged and assured her.

Cora sighed like one with an inexplicable overbearing hunch.

Kweku asked, “Do you mean a situation like say, somebody wanting to marry you or Randa in future, and finds out that Ma has been through some treatment at the psychiatric hospital and is then dissuaded from marrying you because of it?”

Cora nodded.

Kweku laughed. “I don’t think that will ever happen, Cora. Don’t worry. You will fall in love. He will also be so much in love with you that he will hug and comfort you when he gets to know. He will go ahead and marry you grandly, and together you will make a set of beautiful babies like the world is yet to see. Okay?”

Cora smiled.

Kweku was about to enter the boarding house of a professional institution. He became a day student instead, so they could be sending Ma for treatment and regular check-ups at the psychiatric hospital. He couldn’t leave Cora home alone with Ma and Randa, and Pa, who also seemed to be drifting away to only he knew where.

Flower remained in control of the strings. She continued to manipulate the puppet, while Ma, with the help of her medication, took a break from the stage where she had been fused with Pa and feeling his aches and pains.

Chapter Twenty-five

“MONEY!” FLOWER SCREAMED into the telephone, “That is what I want us to talk about, Oldie! Not sex and our next encounter. Money!”

Pa’s hand holding the receiver began to shake. Oldie? Why was Flower calling him so, now? Why was Flower doing that? He just bought her the gold wristwatch she had demanded. So why?

“Flower.” He managed with difficulty, “I just gave you so much.”

“So what?” Flower yelled, “I need more.”

“For what?” Pa begged.

Flower exploded. “You ask me what I need money for? For everything one needs money for. What kind of silly question is that, Oldie?”

Pain shot through Pa’s heart and numbed him. Oldie again? Why was Flower doing this to him? Just this one time that he didn’t have ready money for her?

His prolonged shocked silence pricked Flower’s conscience. She said in a low tone, “It’s for my trip.”

Pa was surprised. “Your trip? What trip Flower? Where?”

“London. The annual long vacation students charter flight. I must go, sweetheart.” Her voice took on an alluring tone, “Every student worth her salt goes at least once during her stay on campus. Sweetheart, if I fail to make it, I will be the laughing stock of my friends and the odd one out. Please!”

Pa dreaded the next question he was going to ask but knew he had to. "How much?" he stammered.

Flower sang the amount like a love song into his ears.

Pa held his chest to forestall the renewed pain that shot through it.

"Sweetheart, you are not even bearing the entire amount. You are only topping it up. So try, sweetheart, okay! For your Flower. Will you?"

Her tone by now was back to the one Pa was used to. The silky coaxing one.

"Are you still there?" Flower asked anxiously when Pa didn't respond.

As soon as Pa said he was, she bubbled hastily, "So have it ready sweetheart. I'll call you again to know when to come for it."

Then changing tones to that of a sultry mistress, added, "You know what can happen when I come over to collect it, don't you?"

Pa was still too numbed to feel any excitement about the prospect of an encounter. When he still didn't respond, Flower signed off hastily saying, "So I'll call again. Have it ready!" And hung up her phone.

Pa replaced his like a zombie. Then sheer fright gripped him. Flower had demanded, just like his office accountant was also demanding. The bank was deducting so much from what he owed them that the balance from his monthly salary was never enough to also deduct payment for what he owed the company. There were a whole lot of bills unpaid at home and other expenses. So for the very first time, he wasn't going to be able to provide Flower what she asked for. He panicked. The possible consequences filled him with fear and trepidation. Flower would leave him. He knew. The patience of the company's accountant would also reach its

end. Ma had never set eyes on Flower, but Ma knew of her. The unseen third occupant of their bedroom. Soon Ma would also find out about a whole lot of other things. About his valuable kente cloths that were gone and the gold and silver cuff links and the gold wristwatch among others. Ma was doing fine. She was on medication. But even at the psychiatric hospital, medication had to, sometimes, be combined with counselling for effective cure. The day Ma would find out about all this, she would snap, Pa knew. And then it would take more than only her medication to return life into her eyes.

He pulled out his drawer and took out the book. Reading it offered him a kind of solace in a weird way. An odd calming effect in the knowledge that that was the one thing over which he still had some control. A decision he could make and execute all by himself. It was a little triumph over Flower. A small victory. Exhilarating.

He was engrossed in the book hours later when his phone rang. It was Flower again. "Is it ready? Should I come for it?"

Pa didn't respond.

"Sweetheart, are you still there?" she sounded frantic.

Pa couldn't find his voice to utter a word.

Flower burst into tears, "You are going to disappoint me, aren't you?"

Pa was astounded. He raked his mind in search of a possibility, even the remotest, to meet Flower's demand. Nothing came up.

Flower grew desperate. "Sweetheart, are you mad with me?" she sang sweetly, "Don't I make you happy? Haven't I made you a happy man since I walked into your life? Didn't you say I make you feel young? Didn't you say I have made you experience the essence of life? Didn't you say I was the axis of your life that made life worth living for you? Didn't you say you needed me? That

I made you complete and fulfilled you. That you had grown addicted to me and the pleasures I give you? Didn't you say I have become your compulsion?" She broke down afresh in tears.

Guilt gobbled up Pa. He had let Flower down. His eyes reddened.

Flower stopped crying abruptly. Her voice turned hostile and hoarse. "Get me the money, Oldie!" she warned furiously, "Do you think it was any fun for me to get you to misuse my body as you did? Do you think it was fun to allow you to run your wrinkled old hands over me as if I were a whore and make me do all those shameful things with you? I, who am only a year older than your son? Would you like it if any man did the things you did with me with any of your daughters? Get me the money! Did you hear me? Get me the money!"

Pa was still so numbed he heard and felt nothing.

"Can't you take a loan or something?" Flower demanded, breathing hard and fast.

Something came over Pa that instant. He smiled to himself. A little self-piteous smile. "I can," he muttered. "Then what are you waiting for?" Flower blurted.

"I'll require a collateral." Pa stated flatly.

"And don't you have anything you can use as security?" Flower yelled. Growing uncontrollably fractious.

Pa replied calmly, "No!" Enjoying it.

Flower sucked in air like an albatross. She was completely at her wits end. "Didn't you say you lived in your own house?" she railed.

Pa was stunned. Still wearing the self-piteous smile, he slowly replaced the receiver. Stretched too full beyond his ability to return to normalcy, Pa in an instant lost his elasticity completely. There was nothing more to stretch. The band had reached its breaking

point. He had told Flower he lived in his own home, with his family, to impress her. It wasn't a lie. But his truth was incomplete. He didn't put up the house. Ma had inherited it from her late father. Ma's parents had been wealthy.

He burst out laughing. Use the house as collateral? Just so Flower would be worth her salt as she put it, and go on a charter flight for summer holidays in London? He had heard of men who would go to the extent of taking away the family television set and deprive his wife and children of it, in order to bring it to his mistress to satisfy her demand for a television set.

He still had some common sense. Thank God.

Ma saw Pa emerge from the back of the house again and head for his car. Then she noticed him search frantically on himself for something. She walked up to him and asked if he had lost something.

"My key. The car key. I can't find it!" Pa mumbled.

Ma frowned, confused. "Isn't it what you have in your hand?"

It was the third time in the past three days that Pa had searched frantically for something that was either right before his eyes or in his hand. And that wasn't Ma's only headache. Pa appeared to have also developed a bizarre fascination for the big mango tree behind the house. The times that Ma saw him, he was standing beneath it and studying it as if searching for God's face among its thick branches and fresh dark green leaves reaching high into the skies. Twice in the past three days too, Pa had moaned and cried out Flower's name in his sleep.

The second time, it had filled her with such rage that she wanted to strike him or slice him up, do something horrible to him to hurt him really deep. She let go when she noticed the

tears. Pa was also crying in his sleep, just as he had made her cry so many times too. Something was happening to Pa. She had not the slightest idea what, but she felt a bleeding in her heart. After three children and over two decades of marriage, a phantom, Flower, had succeeded in cracking what she thought had been an impenetrable shell. The folly of an ostrich? Did she take things for granted? Did she allow herself to be too blinded in the comfort of her faith in the absoluteness of marriage?

The elders talk of conjugal unions in the spirit, like heaven is with earth and the sun is with the moon. They talk of a man's presence on earth being his past life in the spiritual world where he paired up till eternity with one chosen woman. They say there exist two paths to earth from the world of the spirits, that, lives which graduate from the spiritual world to move on and continue to live in the physical on earth, embark on either one of the two paths according to their sex. Males on one path, females on the other. Couples in conjugal unions in the spirit therefore, separate at the start of the two paths.

However, the journey to earth, like all journeys, has its smooth and rough terrains. God the Creator, in His wisdom, plays fair and leaves the spirits of both sexes to battle it out on their own along the paths. Of the spiritual couples in conjugal unions, who by the rule, separated at the start of the paths, the male spirits almost always arrived ahead of their female partners. Sometimes, they arrived at the same time. Occasionally the females arrived before their male partners. One of the most arduous tasks of the many gods and goddesses of love of the world's many tribes, had to date, been the effort of locating spiritual couples who were in conjugal unions, to pair them in marital unions on earth. When one such task was successful, the world witnessed a perfect and solid marriage that not even the sharpest of swords could crack.

In such marriages, the couples melted into each other to become eternally blended as one. If the gods and goddesses were unsuccessful, the couple in the marital union remained two entities forever, only joined loosely at the seams. The application of just a little pressure and the shell is cracked. The genuine tiredness of a wife could go unappreciated and give a husband a legitimate reason in his view, to go and look elsewhere for what the wife was too tired to offer him.

Where the gods and goddesses were successful, even after decades of marriage, the habitual brushes of hands against arms never stopped. The cursory skin contacts in the doorways and along the narrow corridors became regular and routine and simply a part of them. Brushes and touches, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, sometimes intentional, sometimes unintentional, all registering huge emotional effects as messages of endearment communicated without spoken words, became the norm. When the gods and goddesses of love scored a success with a union in the physical that had existed in the spirit, marriage, even after decades, was simply beautiful. The touches during the period of courtship never dried up. The bristles of passion never went blunt. The simple pleasures didn't turn bile bitter to render love taboo.

After over two decades of marriage and on medication to maintain her sanity, Ma sat on their bed, not crying, just thinking. How did Pa submit emotionally so completely to Flower? But Ma could not afford to lose hope. All she could do was wait. And while she waited, Ma carved hope like a beautiful Akuaba doll and placed it in an obscure safe corner inside her heart. Like an infertile woman seeking fertility sought the symbolic and spiritual essence of the Akuaba doll to influence the ancestors on her behalf to have her wish for a child granted, Ma also hoped for an intervention of a sort, with time.

Ma was convinced, the time was nigh. The intervention had occurred. It took the ancestors just days.

Pa woke up that morning full of life and feeling great. For the first time in a long while, he had slept very well.

“Two fried eggs for me today!” Pa announced gaily to Ma at breakfast and smiled broadly, touching her arm lightly.

Ma was amazed. Pa hadn’t had breakfast, let alone a good one, in a long while. Half a cup of tea had been all that he had been taking. Ma’s hopes rose. What better sign could there be for the beginning of Pa’s response to the intervention of the ancestors?

She fried him three eggs.

“The best in years!” Pa quipped and belched.

Ma’s heart leaped.

For the first time in a long, long while, she saw Pa to his car as he set off to work.

At the office, Pa’s secretary almost leaped with fright from her chair when her boss strode in all lit up and greeted her loud and gay, “Good morning!”

The secretary waited for him to settle down, knocked on his office door, poked her head through it and carolled, “Sir, the pile of letters I placed on your table six days ago have still not been signed by you.”

She too was convinced. Her boss hadn’t been himself, but today, he was back.

Pa assured her he would see to them immediately.

Something good must have happened to her boss, the secretary thought. It was an open secret at the office that her boss was in some huge financial mess with the company accountant. She called the accounts clerk, who was a friend. “Has my boss patched things up with your boss?” she asked. “He came in today in a very good mood.”

“Then he is yet to extend his good mood to clearing his mess here. Maybe with a valid cheque this time. All the ones he has issued so far were dud.”

“Oh dear! Well, I must go. Keep me informed.”

The secretary remained in her office, waiting for her boss to summon her to come for the signed letters. When he didn't, she decided that considering the good mood in which he was, it was safe for her to go in and remind him. She knocked and entered. She saw right away that her boss had still not signed the letters. They were still exactly where she left them. She took a good look at her boss again because she found it odd that in spite of the noise she had made when she entered his office, he had still not even raised his head to look at who had come in. Her heart sank at what she saw. Her boss was back in his dark mood and appeared to be in a trance. He was gazing intensely at the small magnetic block on his table that swarmed with office pins. She retreated without a word.

The click sound of the door told Pa that his secretary had left him alone again. He stretched one hand and picked one pin by its small head. The cluster was hypnotizing. He felt the tip of the pin against his left inner thumb. Then he pressed it into his thumb flesh as if testing its sharpness. His eyes remained glazed and focused on the pin slightly embedded in his thumb. He firmed the grip of the pin's head between his right thumb and forefinger, leaned back casually in his chair and began to hum a funeral dirge. Then almost ritualistically, he drove the pin slowly into his thumb.

Back in her office, the secretary was on the phone again with the accounts clerk.

“Two-thirds of his monthly salary to be deducted for six months...a directive from the Board...didn't you say his bankers were deducting about two-thirds from it monthly already... ?

Then what will be paid into his account at the bank will not be enough for the bank to deduct its share, let alone leave a balance for him...Holy Jesus...All right, talk to you again!"

She decided to check on her boss again. She would then report to the administrator if her boss didn't sign those letters by close of work.

She knocked and entered.

"Sir!" she called.

Her boss didn't look up. His eyes were transfixed on his left thumb. His face was bland. Her secretary became suspicious. She took a few steps closer to his table. The letters had turned red with blood. Over half the office pin was firmly embedded inside her boss' left thumb. She ran out screaming.

Ma was attending to a customer in her shop when she noticed Pa's car approaching. She finished with the customer and waited. Was this a surprise? An extension of the morning's good mood? But when the car got nearer, she frowned. Pa was in the front passenger seat. The driver was one of the company drivers. She met the car at the gate. Pa's left thumb was bandaged.

"Just a little accident," he muttered.

The driver parked the car and handed the keys to Ma. He left to return to the office. Pa headed into the house.

"I'll close the shop and be with you!" Ma called after him, "Cora will re-open it when she comes home."

Pa stopped dead in his tracks. "You are closing the shop because of a little injury to my thumb?" And smiled.

It disarmed Ma. She smiled back. "All right. Go in and rest. I'll check on you in about an hour," she told Pa.

Pa smiled again and said, "You will disturb my sleep."

Ma said, "Then I'll make it two hours."

“Three,” countered Pa and smiled again.

Ma returned to the shop.

Pa didn't go to the bedroom. He placed his briefcase in the living room, went through the corridor to the kitchen and unlocked the back door. He stepped into the backyard and shut the kitchen door. It was quiet all around. The neighbours had all gone to work. Their children were at school. The back wall was adequately high. He walked like one going for his last communion to the big mango tree. It had flowered and had begun bearing tiny green fruit. He moved to the trunk and patted it like one would a baby's back. Then he looked up at the branches and to the one big branch he had chosen. He smiled. Everything was in place, well secured and concealed. He congratulated himself and returned into the house. He went to the telephone and dialed:

“Hello!”

Flower recognized his voice right away. “What?” she yelled.

Pa chuckled unaffectedly and took his time with the words as if the words were completely his and at his beck and call. “Did I tell you about the game?”

Flower frowned. Was Oldie going crazy? “What game?” she snapped.

Pa sniggered foolishly. “I am about to play it.” He giggled.

Flower boiled with both rage and curiosity. “Look Oldie, don't ever call me again, do you hear?” And banged the telephone.

The sound felt like an explosion inside Pa's ears. The final call to battle had sounded. Armageddon! At least he told her, didn't he?

He picked one dining chair and went out again to the mango tree. He had already marked where to place the chair. He had planned well. He removed his necktie. His shirt followed. He

stood there in his socks and trousers and singlet.

Now the game could begin!

He climbed the chair and unwound the rope from the branch where it had remained well concealed and undetected. The ready-made noose came loose. He smiled to himself. He widened the noose and slipped it over his head. It rested loosely around his neck. The game darkened. It darkened his disposition. Oldie? That was wrong. That was cruel. That was very, very bad.

He touched the noose. He liked its feel. He drew it tighter around his neck. Oldie?

“Jeeeeessssuuuuusssss!!!”

It was Ma. Ma had intruded in his game. She was screaming and running and crying. She was spoiling his game. Pa moved his legs from the chair and kicked it down. Pain! Oh, what pain! Why didn't he think of that? The pain was...

A painless quiet dark nothingness. A dark void. An empty black hole.

Another game unfolded. Two figures struggling. No! Two outlines. They lacked solidity. Pa looked down. Odd. Was that not him up there on the tree? But the two liquid figures were also him. And they were struggling. Two of him? Him against himself?

Suddenly, darkness.

Pa stared down at himself. His other self stared down at the other and relented. Pa's soul at that instant, evicted itself viciously.

Pa's body hung lifeless from the mango tree, suspended on a rope placed around his neck by his own hands.

End of game. Pa's game.

Epilogue

MUFF CHECKED THE caller and made a face. It was Sylv. “What?” he snapped playfully.

“Eureka!” Sylv declared, failing to sound serious.

“I am going to cut you off in exactly five seconds if you don’t give me one good reason why I should continue tolerating this nonsense!” Muff threatened humorously.

“My aunt Siiv!” Sylv announced.

“Worse than I thought. Bye S...”

“Wait! I said Eureka!”

“So what? You found a way to make her be able to call you Sylv?”

“No. Better. I found a way to silence her forever!”

“Holy Moses!” Muff wailed, “Radio presenter turned murderer?”

“Worse! Radio presenter turned blackmailer. I found a way to silence her forever on the Let-them-say Exeter corned beef saga. I have dealt her a counter attack. A clean zoom-zoom jab.”

“She came around again?” Muff asked.

“Believe it or not, she did!” Sylv confirmed, “A kind of an audacious follow-up check, which as you know, was completely unnecessary. The whole world now knows about the positive HIV status of the late Pesewa’s four older wives. Which presenter is interested in making such old news a morning show issue again? So I tried to figure out why she obviously used that only as an excuse to return to visit me so soon again. So I put my one

and one together and got my two. She loses nothing financially when she comes visiting because I refund her transport cost and give her something extra. She also gets her free bottles of beer to quaff. They are not aware of this habit of hers back home. So guess what I did?"

"Oh, get on with it, Sylv!"

"In the most loving and innocent tone I could muster, I asked her if she had ever thought about the number of exercise books that could be bought with the amount I spend on the bottles of beer for her, for free distribution to pupils in our hometown."

Muff roared with such loud laughter that Sylv had to remove the receiver away from his ears to save his eardrums.

"Have you told Let-them-say yet?" Muff quipped.

Sylv laughed. "I am about to. I couldn't do it over dinner yesterday. I was too excited. Do you happen to know the dog-word for exercise books?"

They both burst into renewed laughter.

"Sad about the four older wives though," Sylv cut into their laughter. Coming up with that bizarre custom no one had ever heard of as an excuse to ban them from the funeral activities was uncalled for."

"That was very shallow of his sisters," Muff added quietly, "very shallow. And look at how they have suddenly become so close to 5th Wife. Announcing her everywhere as their late brother's wife representing all his five wives. How odd!"

"Yes. How very odd. The irony of life. Very odd!" Sylv muttered.

The woman was overwhelmingly excited. She was on the phone with her brother in Germany. "Oh Bro," she sang, "the way this Prophet Abednego is going about things, I swear Bro, my visa will

go through this time. It will go through smoothly like okro down the throat. Do you know how long he fasted? Two weeks Bro. Two whole weeks. And dry oh! Dry fasting. No food, no water. Now it's like the final stages..."

"Of what?" her brother sniped.

"The special prayers. He has different special prayers. Special prayers for infertility; special prayers for prosperity and special prayers for visa. And with the visa, there are extra special prayers for American, British and German visas."

"All with corresponding charges I guess!" the brother spat sarcastically.

"Oh Bro, but that is how it should be! But with me, because he is living in your uncompleted house, which is where he also has his powerful church, he charged me very little. Only..."

"Keep it to yourself!"

"Oh Bro, why don't you like the prophet? He is a man of God oh! You wait, as soon as I send the candles for the final prayers, you will begin to see a manifestation of his powers."

"What candles?"

"Oh, just a few candles for the final prayers. Twelve black, six red and six yellow. Then the holy bath."

"The holy what?" the brother yelled.

"Bath Bro. Sunday midnight, he will go with me to the beach and bath me in the sea. It is called cleansing."

Her brother's patience snapped. "He will go with you alone at midnight to bath you in the sea?" he roared.

"Oh Bro, yes. It is very important."

"And how is he going to bath you? Did he show you where in the Bible this requirement was?"

"Oh Bro, I don't understand you. What do you mean by how is he going to bath me?"

“You don’t understand the question? You don’t understand ‘how is he going to bath you’? I want to know if he is going to bath you like we bath in the bathroom. With sponge, soap and water. And naked!”

“Bro, he said if I am shy, I could wear a G-string.”

“G-string?” the brother screeched, “The prophet knows G-string? And asked you to wear a G-string for a spiritual bath of cleansing in the sea at midnight alone with you? Sis, I give you three days...”

“Bro...”

“Three days!”

“Bro wait! You don’t understand. The cleansing is very important. You see, after the prayers with the black and red and yellow candles, followed by the...”

“G-string bath...”

“Oh Bro, please, let me finish. You see, after the bath, when I go to the German Embassy, the visa officer will no longer see my face as worms and...”

“Three days, Sis! Get that prophet of yours out of my house!”

“But Bro...”

“Three days!”

“Bro...”

Bang!

“How is she doing?” Aggie asked Dina.

“What can I say? Under the circumstances, I’ll say that she is coping rather well. But she is reluctant to return to campus. Many knew Dam was her boyfriend,” Dina replied.

Aggie chuckled. “Isn’t it funny how we all dwell right away only on females whenever prostitutes are mentioned. Women and

girls. Who would have thought of...?"

"Male prostitution? We do think of it, don't we? But only in the realm of homosexuality." Dina came in. "We forget or don't want to accept that in these times, there are no longer only sugar daddies out there. There are sugar mummies too. But going there might open a whole new can of worms. Maybe that is what scares us. We may find ourselves burdened with a worm species we cannot effectively deal with, without attacking the very basic fabric of our traditional societies."

"Are we in a philosophical mood or are we not?" Aggie teased.

They both laughed.

"Did she ask of me?" Aggie asked abruptly.

"Yes," Dina replied.

"Was Vickie with you?" Aggie asked.

"Yes."

"Dina."

"Yes."

"I have agreed to go and see her," Aggie divulged.

"Their mother?"

"Yes."

"I think it's the right decision. Were you pressured?"

"Oh no!"

"Was Cora present?"

"No. Just Kweku and his wife Elsie and me."

"So when are you going to see her?" Dina asked.

"When I am done with you!" Aggie told her.

Dina coughed nervously. "Aggie," she called.

"Yes Dina."

"Have you considered the possibility that Randa may have infected Idan?"

“Yes.”

“And therefore...”

“Yes.”

“Oh Aggie. Have you talked?”

“Yes. We’ll go in next week for our tests.” She replied and broke down.

Dina allowed her time to cry.

“If he was cheating on me, why didn’t he just use a condom?” Aggie sobbed.

“Did you ask him?” Dina asked.

Aggie blew her nose and replied, “He said Randa didn’t want him to.”

“Of course! How then could she have claimed to be pregnant by him in order to deal him the bitter blow of false hope she had dealt him? She needed him not to use protection. And she was also living in her fool’s paradise and believing that Dam was a businessman and working with his father. What a huge web of deceit. What a tragedy.”

Aggie sighed heavily. “So I’ll get in touch after I go to see their Ma. Did you talk with Kabria?”

“Yes, She has agreed to resume work earlier than planned,” Dina disclosed. “I wonder how she will deal with it.”

“Kabria?” Aggie wondered.

“No. Their Ma. About Randa.”

“She doesn’t know about it. Kweku and Elsie entreated me to be careful not to divulge it to her.”

Aggie took the seat on the single chair placed at the foot of the bed, facing Ma who was reclining on about four pillows arranged against the bedpost. Ma had recovered fairly well from her ordeal at the Prayer Camp on the hill. She had put on some weight and

had resumed taking her regular medication as prescribed for her at the Psychiatric hospital. She was calm and composed.

Aggie was nervous and daunted.

“Did my children tell you what I was looking for?” Ma asked suddenly.

“No,” Aggie replied lowly.

Ma smiled a little. “I should think they wouldn’t, because they also don’t know. How is your marriage?”

A pained look crept into Aggie’s eyes.

Ma smiled. “It’s already there!” she remarked quietly.

Aggie stared at her confused.

“What I wanted to see. It’s already there in your eyes.”

Aggie fidgeted restlessly.

“Look at me. I want to look into your eyes while we talk.” Ma spoke calmly.

Aggie raised her head.

Ma smiled. “I won’t harm you. My children are not fools. They would not have left you here alone with me if they had thought I could harm you. Don’t be scared.”

Aggie relaxed nervously and mumbled an incoherent “thank you.”

Ma smiled again. “I used to hate your ghost...” she said dispassionately and laughed suddenly. “You hovered over my late husband. Your sexual strength and mystery clung to him. You were with him everywhere and all the time. He brought you into this home and left your scent on this bed and in the sheets and pillows every night. Do you by chance know why he nicknamed you Flower?”

Aggie shook her head slowly.

“The footprints you left on my family and on this household were flagrant and treacherous. I shed so many tears over you and

uttered a prayer to every force out there every night. Do you know the prayer I prayed? That wherever you were, should the Lord one day show mercy on you and bless you with a man who would desire to make a wife of you, that for every tear you caused me to shed, a huge rain cloud be molded from it. That on your special day, all the clouds of my tears should gather in the skies. That thunder would rumble and roar after every flash of lightning and bring down my drops of tears as heavy falling rain upon your head. That whenever you looked back upon your special day, it wouldn't be the joys it brought with it that you would recall, but the tears and sorrows. Did it rain heavily on your wedding day?"

Aggie began to tremble.

Ma smiled. "Flowers are endearing. This house used to be full of flowers. Now it's bare. They say I cut them all off. Horrible. How can anyone hate flowers? Such beauty. So pleasing. Such fragrance. Do you remember the perfume you were using back then two decades ago?"

Aggie could only stare at her. Her throat tightened up. The pain and suffering in Aggie's eyes were so glaring they threatened to burst forth.

Ma added placidly, "It's scent was very bitter."

Aggie froze.

A long silence ensued. It was like a dagger was dangling from the skies and circling over their heads.

Ma broke the silence suddenly. "The medicines I take sometimes make me feel very drowsy." And began re-adjusting the pillows.

Aggie took the cue and rose.

"Can you find your way out?" Ma asked sedately.

"Yes," Aggie replied tersely.

"Good," Ma muttered and stretched herself out fully on the bed.

Aggie picked her up bag. She cast Ma another look. Ma was beginning to doze off. Aggie started towards the door.

“Flower,” Ma called when Aggie was almost in the doorway.

Aggie nearly toppled over. She began to cry.

Ma’s face was still buried in the pillow. She neither raised her head nor opened her eyes. “Tell my children I want to smell some flowers. Tell Kweku to bring me some flowers. I want to smell the delightful perfume of a bunch of beautiful yellow roses.”

END.



★ Picture by courtesy of
Dr. Regina Bouillon

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AMMA DARKO began her writing career in Germany where she sojourned in the eighties. She is a graduate of the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi - Ghana. She is the author of the critically acclaimed *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and *The Housemaid* (1998), published by Heinemann (Oxford) in the African Writer Series. Her third novel, *Faceless* (2003) was her first to come out in Ghana and was published by Sub-Saharan Publishers. She also contributed the short story "The Colour of Poverty" (2001) to a collection by Amnesty International, Germany. She has been published in other languages and was the recipient of the

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"OVER A DECADE Amma Darko appears to have seized the centre stage of women's world, plowing tickling and reaching into inner recesses, to tell their story. A story of misery, pain, agony, dilemmas, frustrations. After *Faceless*, her last novel, where the grim realities of street side nightmares unfold in gory detail, Amma Darko floats her reader this time on a petal of Flowers, with a capital F ...It's world full of inverted reality; yet this topsy-turvy world, becomes the norm in *Not Without Flowers*.

The lessons in the book make it compulsory reading by all in search of dreadful social realities, in a veiled world of peace and tranquility."

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